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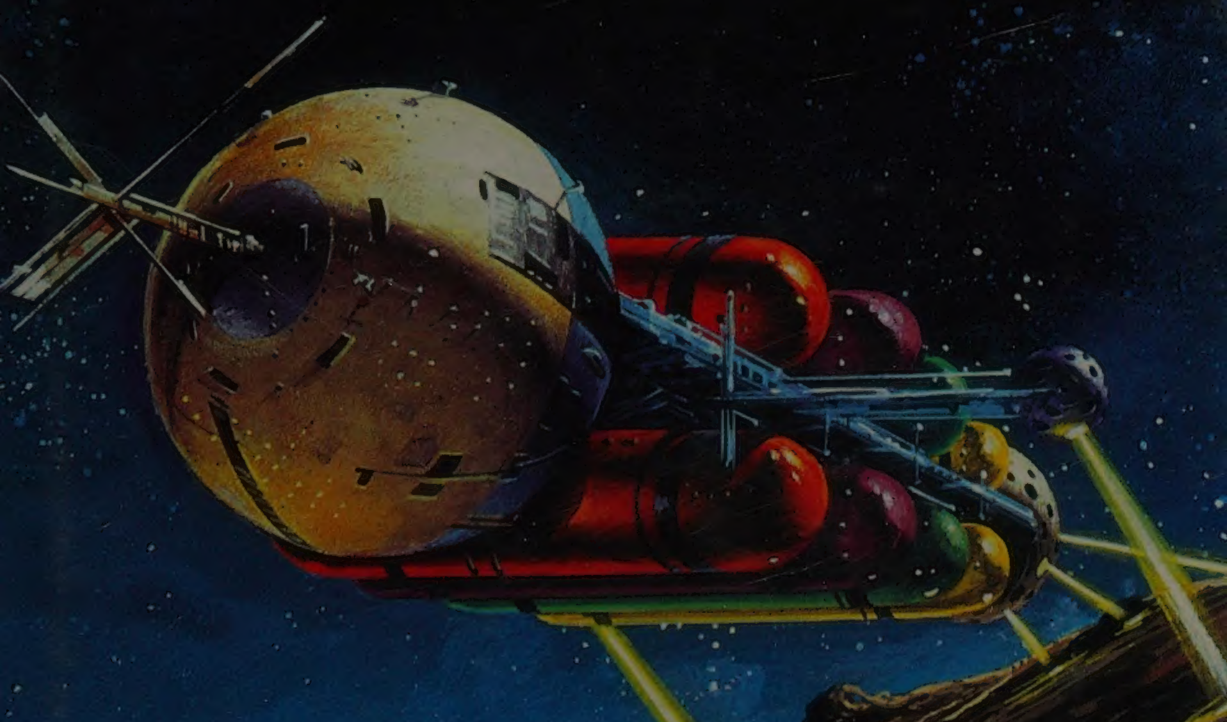
T SILVERBERG
PRESENTS

THE GREAT SF STORIES

(1964)



EDITED BY ROBERT SILVERBERG
AND MARTIN H. GREENBERG

$25.00

1964, the year that ion and nuclear rocket engines were first test fired, and Gemini I had its first successful unmanned flight. *Way Station* by Clifford Simak and "No Truce with Kings" by Poul Anderson won the Hugos. *The Burning World* by J.G. Ballard started what came to be called British post-genre SF—and Fritz Leiber's *The Wanderer* and Philip K Dick's *Martian Time-Slip* changed our view of the world... and time.

So hop back in the time machine and travel back to 1964...

when the breeding of intelligent cats saved mankind from a dreadful fate...

when space exploration had not yet destroyed our beliefs about Mars...

when a cathedral appeared on Mars...

when the descendants of castaway criminals strove for respectability...

when being a soldier was not a career but a religious calling...

Continuing where Science Fiction Legend Isaac Asimov left off, Robert Silverberg and Martin H. Greenberg proudly present the Great SF Stories of 1964.

MAY 20 2002

The Great SF Stories: 1964

Edited by Robert Silverberg and Martin H. Greenberg

The NESFA Press
Post Office Box 809
Framingham, MA 01701
2001

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FIRST EDITION
December 2001

International Standard Book Number:
1-886778-21-3

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The Great SF Stories: 1964

FOREWORD

Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg began this series in 1979, with DAW Books as the publisher. The first volume covered the best science fiction of 1939—the year in which John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction,* initiated the revolution in story concept and narrative technique that gave us modern science fiction (as exemplified by such Campbell writers as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, A. E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, and L. Sprague de Camp). The Asimov-Greenberg series of anthologies continued for twenty-five volumes, coming to an end in 1992 with the volume for 1963. Taken all together, the set constitutes the single most valuable anthology archive of the science-fiction short story as practiced by English-language writers in the middle years of the twentieth century.

The DAW Books series ended where it did, with the 1963 volume, for two reasons. One was that Isaac Asimov himself died in April of 1992, just prior to the publication of that final volume. The other, as Martin Greenberg tells us on the last page of that book, is that the series was never intended to continue beyond that year, "because 1963 was the last year before Don Wollheim and Terry Carr began their series...of 'best of the year' collections." The Asimov-Greenberg series had been intended all along as the precursor to the Carr-Wollheim series, and now the linkage was complete.

But, here at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Wollheim and Carr are long gone themselves, and so are the year's-best anthologies they edited—fading collectors' items, decades old and long out of print. Today's commercial science-fiction publishers, intent primarily on serving the needs of a large, young, and unsophisticated readership, have little interest in restoring such books to availability. We are in danger, therefore, of losing much of our heritage of classic short science fiction.

And so, when NESFA Press invited me to work with Marty Greenberg to continue the Asimov-Greenberg series beyond 1963, I accepted without hesitation. It is not the first time I have been called upon to fill Isaac's shoes, as anyone who reads my "Reflections" column in the science-fiction magazine that bears his name is aware. I have no delusions about being able to take Isaac's place in the science-fictional cosmos, but I do indeed regard myself as capable of serving in his stead in one way and another, and my own qualifications as an anthologist have, I think, been well demonstrated over the past thirty-five years.

Nor does the existence of the parallel Wollheim-Carr series, even in its out-of-print status, make this continuation irrelevant. There were no great and fundamental differences in taste among Don Wollheim and Terry Carr and me about the nature of good science fiction, and yet, I dare say, each of us would have produced quite a different Best SF of the Year anthology for any given year. The clearest proof of that is to compare the present Silverberg-Greenberg volume for 1964 with the corresponding volume in Wollheim-Carr, which bore the title of *World's Best Science Fiction: 1965.* There are nineteen stories in our book; there were seventeen in theirs. Just three stories (Kagan, Brunner, Leiber) are to be found on both contents pages.

There was, at the time, another annual best-of-the-year collection, this one edited by Judith Merril—a compilation whose purview often ran far outside the conventional realm of science fiction as we knew it. (Her volume covering 1964 included stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer and James T. Farrell along with the likes of Arthur Clarke, Fritz Leiber, and Mack Reynolds.) The correlation with the Merril book is even more tenuous: only the Ballard story included here, and, once again, the Brunner, are in both collections. Q.E.D.—herewith, three and a half decades after the fact, is an entirely new take on the best science-fiction stories of 1964.

— Robert Silverberg

INTRODUCTION

1964 was a Presidential election year in the United States, and as it opened the country was still shaking from the aftereffects of the assassination of John F. Kennedy only six weeks before. The great issue of the time was the rivalry for global domination between the United States and the Soviet Union, a struggle that seemed to involve the world in the risk of a nuclear holocaust. Therefore, when Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona, the leading Republican candidate for the Presidential nomination, said on January 5 that if elected he would seek concessions from the Soviets by threatening to break off diplomatic relations, and would renounce the nuclear test-ban treaty "if it appeared to our advantage to test in the atmosphere," his statements touched off shivers of terror in many quarters. Goldwater nevertheless would become his party's nominee, running against Lyndon B. Johnson, who had succeeded to the Presidency upon Kennedy's death. During the campaign, Johnson would call Goldwater a "raving, ranting demagogue," and many Americans agreed, giving Johnson a landslide victory in November. History has come to reevaluate its opinions of both men since that time.

The nation was preoccupied also with civil-rights issues. Marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and demonstrations of other sorts caused turmoil in many states as the battle for racial equality before the law reached its greatest intensity. Maryland, in March, became the first southern state to pass a public-accommodations law, barring racial discrimination in hotels, motels, and restaurants. But in June three young civil-rights workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James E. Chaney, disappeared mysteriously in Mississippi, and hundreds of Federal agents were sent to search for them. A few weeks later, Congress passed a landmark Federal civil-rights bill, which President Johnson signed on July 2, saying, "Let us close the springs of racial poison." The bodies of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were found at the beginning of August; they had been shot and buried in a newly constructed earthen dam. Government enforcement of the new Civil Rights Act led to rioting later that autumn in many cities both in the south and the north. In October, Martin Luther King, Jr., was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1964 for his advocacy of non-violent resistance in the civil-rights struggle.

America's growing involvement in Vietnam caused concern also. Repeated guerrilla attacks on American personnel there led to a steady buildup of the United States' military presence in Southeast Asia; by July the size of the American force had reached 21,000. In the first week of August two American destroyers were attacked by North Vietnamese PT boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, leading to angry threats from President Johnson and, on August 7, the passage of a Congressional resolution supporting the President in whatever retaliatory actions he deemed necessary. Further expansion of U.S. force in the region appeared inevitable.

Other significant events of the year included the crash-landing of the *Ranger 7* spacecraft on the moon in July, after televising 4,320 close-up photos of the lunar surface (the first manned landing on the moon was still five years in the future); the launching of three Soviet cosmonauts into orbit in a single spacecraft, the first time that had ever been achieved, in October; China's first nuclear-bomb test the same month; and the publication of the Warren Report, which concluded that President Kennedy had been shot by a single assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. Thieves broke into the American Museum of Natural History in New York and stole rare gems, including the 563-carat sapphire Star of India. The jewels were recovered in Miami two months later.

General Douglas MacArthur, biologist Rachel Carson, geneticist J. B. S. Haldane, actor Peter Lorre, novelist Ian Fleming, Prime Mister Jawaharlal Nehru of India, and former President Herbert Hoover died in 1964. French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre received the Nobel Prize for Literature and refused it. Professor Charles Townes of M.I.T. shared the Physics prize with Nikolai Basov and Alexander Prochorov of the Lebedev Institute for Physics in Moscow for their work in developing the maser and the laser.

The best-selling books of the year included the Warren Report on the Kennedy assassination, Terry Southern's erotic novel *Candy,* Ian Fleming's last James Bond novel, *You Only Live Twice,* and John Cheever's *The Wapshot Scandal.* The year's movies included Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence,* and *A Hard Day's Night,* starring a much-talked-about group of British pop singers called the Beatles. The St. Louis Cardinals beat the New York Yankees in the World Series. The 1964 Olympic Games, held in Tokyo, once more became a contest between the United States and the Soviet Union for most gold medals, with America coming out on top, 36-30.

As for the year in science fiction—

Nobody seems to have compiled any statistics on how many s-f books were published in 1964, but it would be surprising to learn that the year's total reached very far beyond 100 books. (The number is easily ten times as great nowadays.) Doubleday, Ace, Ballantine, and the long-forgotten Pyramid Books were the only companies who published science fiction regularly then. But the year's offerings, sparse though they were, included some major novels: Fritz Leiber's *The Wanderer,* Edgar Pangborn's *Davy,* Robert A. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold,* John Brunner's *The Whole Man,* Cordwainer Smith's *The Planet Buyer.* The eerily prolific Philip K. Dick offered no less than four: *Clans of the Alphane Moon, Martian Time-Slip, The Penultimate Truth,* and *The Simulacra.* Jack Vance produced a story collection, *Future Tense,* and a pair of novels, *The Star King* and *The Killing Machine,* which would be the first two of a five-novel series. Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson collaborated on *The Reefs of Space,* first of a trilogy; Robert Silverberg's books for the year included the novel *Regan's Planet,* the story collection *Godling, Go Home!* and a book for younger readers, *Time of the Great Freeze.* Poul Anderson gave us *Trader to the Stars* and *Three Worlds to Conquer.* From Brian Aldiss came *The Dark Light Years* and *Graybeard.* All in all, not a trifling group.

Science-fiction magazines, though, were much more important, relatively speaking, than they are today. Many of the most capable s-f writers, among them Theodore Sturgeon, Alfred Bester, Robert Sheckley, and Cordwainer Smith, concentrated primarily on the short-story form at that time, and many of the best novels of the period, such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Robert A. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold,* first saw print as magazine serials.

The outstanding magazines of 1964, probably, were the two edited by Frederik Pohl, *Galaxy* and *If.* Pohl had added a third title in 1963, *Worlds of Tomorrow,* which ran a number of notable stories by the likes of Aldiss, Dick, and the newcomer Roger Zelazny in its second year. John Campbell's long-time magazine *Astounding,* now called *Analog* and published in sumptuous slick-magazine format, was still important also, though no longer the dominant factor it had been fifteen years before. *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* now under the editorship of Avram Davidson, continued its tradition of literary excellence. *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic,* two venerable magazines that had had a long history of printing undistinguished action-adventure stories but now were undergoing a renaissance with Cele Goldsmith Lalli at the editorial helm, published a goodly quantity of worthwhile stories, five of which are included in this volume. The estimable British magazines *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy,* which under the guidance of founding editor E. J. Carnell had specialized in solid science fiction and fantasy in conventional middle-of-the-road modes, had closed up shop in 1963, but in 1964 they reappeared in paperback format under new editors, Michael Moorcock for *New Worlds* and Kyril Bonfiglioli for its companion. The Moorcock-edited *New Worlds* would shortly stake a position for itself as a vehicle for literary revolutionaries, and by the end of the year was sounding the first bugle-calls for the vigorous though short-lived experimental-fiction movement that became known as the New Wave.

Science-fiction readers mourned the deaths in November 1964 of H. Beam Piper, one of John Campbell's steadiest and most popular contributors in the postwar era, and of Richard McKenna, whose brief but spectacular science-fiction career had given us such stories as "Casey Agonistes" and "Hunter, Come Home."

The World Science Fiction Convention—which Isaac Asimov, in earlier volumes of this series, always referred to as "the gathering of the Family"—was held in Oakland, California, at the tiny Hotel Leamington. Pacificon II was its name, and 523 people attended. That is about a tenth as many as would be found at the average modern-era Worldcon; the science-fiction world in 1964 was minuscule in comparison to that of today in all respects. Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, husband and wife, were the guests of honor, and others in attendance included Jack Vance, Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Anthony Boucher, Robert Silverberg, Frederik Pohl, Ursula K. Le Guin (the first convention for this new writer!), Fritz Leiber, and Poul Anderson. Hugo Awards (for work published in 1963) were given to Clifford D. Simak for his novel *Way Station,* Poul Anderson for his novelet "No Truce with Kings," John W. Campbell, Jr., for the best professional magazine, *Analog,* and Ed Emshwiller as best professional artist. A special award went to Donald A. Wollheim's Ace Books as best book publisher, and George Scithers received the Hugo for best amateur magazine for *Amra.*

Taken all in all, 1964 was a transitional year for science fiction: the classic modes of storytelling so splendidly advocated by John Campbell's *Astounding* during the previous twenty-five years still held sway, but the first signs of change were visible in the work of the new generation of writers that had arrived in the late fifties and early sixties: Farmer, Le Guin, Zelazny, Ellison, Brunner, Ballard, Aldiss, Disch, Spinrad, Silverberg. The real fireworks were still ahead, but a transformative spirit was already in the air.

Here, then, are the Silverberg-Greenberg choices for 1964's finest short-length science fiction.

— Robert Silverberg

OUTWARD BOUND

by Norman Spinrad (1940 --)
Analog, March

This was Norman Spinrad's third published science-fiction story, coming less than a year after his first, 1963's "The Last of the Romany." Much of his early work appeared in John Campbell's *Analog,* and there is considerable irony in that, for Spinrad's later political radicalism and penchant for literary experimentation were the antithesis of Campbell's rock-ribbed conservatism in both areas. But Campbell was a complicated man and an eclectic editor. He privately believed, quite likely, that male human beings of Scottish descent and Protestant faith were the highest life-forms of the galaxy, and he tended to favor them both as story protagonists and as contributors to his magazine. But that didn't stop him from publishing a good many stories by Jewish writers (Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg, Norman Spinrad) or by female ones (Anne McCaffrey, C. L. Moore, Judith Merril). And please note that the protagonist of "Outward Bound" is Grand Admiral Jacob ben Ezra, a member of a clan not native to the Scottish highlands.

Spinrad's most famous novel, *Bug Jack Barron,* was published in 1969, and brought him condemnation as a "nameless degenerate" when it was serialized in Britain's *New Worlds.* Among his many other passionate, controversial books are *The Iron Dream* (1972), *The Void Captain's Tale* (1983), and *Child of Fortune* (1985). New York-born, he has lived in Paris since the late 1980s.

Captain Peter Reed floated closer to the big central viewport of the conning globe.

Before him, filling half his field of vision, was the planet Maxwell, green continents and blue seas reminding him of Earth.

He shook his white-haired head. Earth was fifty light-years off, or to put it another way, seventy years ago, or in another way, only four months.

Reed shrugged, not an easy task for a seventy-year-old man in free fall. Or to put it another way, an eight-hundred-year-old man.

Reed could not help laughing aloud. Fifty subjective years in space, he thought, eight hundred years in objective time, and still it has its wonder for me.

As he watched, a mote of light detached itself from the disk of Maxwell, and arced upward.

That would be Director Horvath's ship, thought Reed. Last time the *Outward Bound* was at Maxwell, it had been ruled by a hereditary king. But that was three hundred years ago. King La Farge, thought Reed sadly, dead and gone three hundred years.

This Lazlo Horvath, now. He seems to be a different proposition. Ambitious, dangerous.

Reed smiled wryly. If he keeps up this way, he may soon he honored by a visit from Jacob ben Ezra.

The captain spoke into the communicator. "Rog, get the reception room ready. Our customer's on the way."

He paddled awkwardly to the rear of the conning globe, grabbed a guard rail, and pulled himself through the rotating doorway, into the main cylinder of the *Outward Bound*.

Immediately, he felt the tug of gravity. The *Outward Bound* was an untidy collection of cylinders and globes, held together by spars. While in orbit, the whole conglomeration spun about a central axis, creating an artificial gravity. But, of course, it was necessary that the conning globe be stationary, so it hung in front of the main cylinder, mounted on frictionless bearings, so that it alone did not share the ship's rotation.

Captain Reed made his way to the reception room. Lazlo Horvath should be an eager customer. The last tradeship to hit Maxwell had been the *Stargod,* one hundred years ago, and that was still in the days of the Kingdom.

Director Horvath was new and ambitious, and like all planetary leaders, he chafed under the yoke of Earth. An ideal customer.

Roger Reed was already in the reception room when his father arrived. There was some family resemblance. He had his father's large frame, but on him it was well-muscled, not hung with loose flesh. His hair was a flamboyant red, and he was going through one of his periods of experimentation with mustaches. This one was only a week old, and its ultimate nature could not yet be discerned.

"Horvath's on board, Dad," he said.

"Please, Roger," said the old man, with a weariness born of endless repetition, "at least when there is a customer aboard, *don't* call me 'Dad'."

"Sorry, sir."

Captain Reed looked about the reception room. It was the one area of calculated ostentation on the ship. It was paneled in real knotty pine. A genuine wool carpet lined it from wall to wall. The captain sat behind a huge mahogany desk, on a genuine red leather covered chair. Three other such chairs were scattered about the room. A viewer was built into one wall.

The room always made Peter Reed feel uncomfortable.

"Well, Roger," said the captain, "do you think this'll be a good haul?"

"Don't see why not, da…*sir*. The Directory of Maxwell seems to be at that stage when they think that with a *little* help, they can break the Terran hegemony. They ought to go quite high for the force field, for instance."

The old man sighed. "They never learn, do they?" he said. "No doubt Horvath will think that the force field is an ultimate weapon. He'll never stop to realize that on Earth, it's already seventy years old."

"Why so glum, *Captain?*" said the younger Reed. "After all, it's our stock in trade."

"So it is, so it is."

An orderly appeared at the door. "Captain Peter Reed," he said formally, "it is my honor to present Lazlo Horvath, Director of Maxwell."

A short, squat man, of about fifty, stalked into the room. He was dressed in a black uniform, with gold trim, encircled by a wide Sam Browne belt. He wore heavy black boots.

Oh, no, thought Peter Reed, not one of *them!*

Nevertheless, he rose politely, wryly aware of the plainness of his simple light-green coveralls. "Director Horvath."

"Captain Reed."

"My second, Roger Reed."

"Mr. Reed."

"Sit down, Director," said the captain.

Horvath perched himself on the edge of one of the chairs.

"It has been a while since a starship visited Maxwell," he said. His voice was deep and crisp.

"Yes, I know. The trader *Stargod,* one hundred years ago."

For a moment, there was a flicker of puzzlement on Horvath's tough face. "Ah, yes, the *Stargod,*" he said smoothly. "Well, Captain Reed, what have you to offer?"

"Several new concepts," said Peter Reed, studying the Director. It was obvious that the man had let something slip. But what?

"Such as?"

"For one thing, an amusing new concept in drinks. Roger, the refreshments."

Roger Reed waved his hand, and a panel slid aside, revealing a pitcher of red liquid, and three glasses on a tray. He poured the drinks.

Captain Reed smiled as he saw the perplexed look on Horvath's face. The drink was made up of two different wines, one hot, one cold, kept separate by a new chemical technique so that one tasted alternately hot and cold liquid. It was a strange feeling.

"Very amusing, Captain Reed," said Horvath. "But surely you don't expect Maxwell to pay good radioactives for such a parlor trick."

Reed grinned. The hot-and-cold liquid technique was just a come-on, of course. The really big commodity he had to sell was the force field.

"Director," he said, "as you know, traders don't sell *products,* except radioactives, at times. What we sell is science, knowledge, techniques. Now the drink may be a parlor trick, but there can be practical applications of the technique."

"Perhaps, perhaps," said Horvath shortly, "but what *else* do you have? Perhaps...perhaps you at least have the secret of Overdrive?"

Peter Reed laughed. "Maybe I have the Philosopher's Stone, as well ?" He saw that Horvath was not amused. "I'm sorry, Director," he said. "It's just that we've never made port on any planet, in the eight hundred years that the *Outward Bound* has been in space, where they didn't ask that question. No, we don't have the secret of Overdrive. It is my opinion that there never will be an Overdrive. Man will never travel faster than light. It's a chimera, a schizophrenic compulsion to leave the limiting realm of the real universe, to find a never-never land called Hyperspace, or what have you, where reality is suspended, and the Galaxy belongs to Man."

Horvath frowned. "A very pretty little speech," he said. "So easy for *you* to say. But then, you are not under the heel of Earth. You starmen are by nature free agents. But we, we *colonials,* we know what it is to suffer the tyranny of time. Maxwell is fifty light-years from Earth. Therefore, since we were settled from Earth, from an Earth that was already sixty years ahead of us when we emerged from Deep Sleep, we will *always* be sixty years behind Earth, just as the outer ring will always be two hundred years behind. To you, an Overdrive would be just one more thing to peddle, although it would bring the best price in history. To us, an Overdrive would mean freedom."

"Of course, you are right, Director," said Captain Reed. "Nevertheless, that doesn't make Overdrive any more possible. However"—he noticed

Horvath's anticipation with satisfaction—"we do have something new, something big. I suppose they've been looking for this as long as they've been looking for an Overdrive—*a force field.*"

Horvath's eyes widened. *"A force field?"*

"Ah, you are interested."

"Of course. It would be idiotic to try and hide it. *This,* Maxwell wants."

"And what have *you* to offer?" asked Peter Reed softly.

"One ton of thorium."

"Oh really, Director!" said Reed. "That's all right for the hot-cold technique, but—"

"Two tons!"

"Come, come, Mr. Horvath. A force field is the ultimate defensive weapon, after all. Two measly tons—"

"Ten tons!"

"Now, what are we going to do with all that thorium? Can't you do better? We deal in knowledge, you know. Perhaps you have something in that area—"

"Well," said Horvath, his hard eyes narrowing, "there was another ship here, only three years ago."

"Oh?"

"Colonizer, heading for the outer ring. Direct from Earth."

"So what?"

"Well, Captain, there was a *passenger* aboard."

"A passenger?"

"Yes, a Dr. Ching pen Yee. Had to leave Earth quickly, so it seems, some kind of mathematical physicist. We're holding him."

"I don't see what this has to do with *us,"* said Peter Reed.

Horvath smiled crookedly. "Grand Admiral Jacob ben Ezra is on his way to Maxwell. In fact, he's decelerating already. Should be here in about a month."

Captain Reed stroked his nose. If Earth was sending ben Ezra himself after Dr. Ching, the man must be someone really important. Earth virtually *never* pursued a fugitive beyond the twenty-five-light-year radius of the Integral Control Zone. And Horvath knew it.

"So what are you offering?" he said slowly.

"Ben Ezra can't know that he was put off here," said Horvath. "He'll be eager to get away. I propose that I trade you Ching for the force-field theory."

"But neither of us knows whether Ching has anything of value," said Reed, knowing that anyone who was being pursued by Jacob ben Ezra over fifty light-years must know something *very* valuable indeed.

But Horvath knew it, too. "Come, Captain. We both know that Earth would not send ben Ezra, unless Ching was very important indeed. Ching and one ton of thorium for the force field."

"Ching and three tons," said Reed, with a little smile.

"Ching and two tons."

Peter Reed laughed. "Ching and three tons for the force field *and* the hot-cold technique."

"Very well, Captain," said Horvath, rising and sticking out his hand, "you've got a deal."

The two men shook hands.

"Have your men begin bringing up the thorium immediately," said Reed, "and get your scientists up here quick, to learn the techniques. I certainly don't want to be in this system when ben Ezra gets here."

"Of course not," said Horvath, with a grin. "Rest assured, Captain, I'm a very good liar. And believe me when I say it has been a pleasure doing business with you."

"The same, Director. Mr. Reed will show you to the air lock."

As Roger Reed opened the door, Horvath stopped and turned.

"Captain," he said, "one thing. If you ever do get hold of an Overdrive, Maxwell will match anyone's price for it. You can write your own bill of sale."

Captain Reed frowned, "You know as well as I do, that we traders sell the same knowledge to every planet we touch."

Horvath eyed him thinly. "I am aware of the practice," he said. "However, in the case of an Overdrive, Maxwell would make it well worth your while to make it an *exclusive* sale."

Reed shook his head, and grinned. "I'll keep it in mind, Director," he said.

Grand Admiral Jacob ben Ezra finished his fourth cigarette of the morning. On a starship, with its own self-contained atmosphere to maintain, smoking was a hideous luxury. But Admiral ben Ezra was a man with privileges. A small, frail old man of eighty subjective years, he had been in space for over seven hundred objective years, and was something of a living legend.

Right now, he was nervous. He turned to his aide. "David," he said, "can't we cut a week or two off the time?"

"No, sir," replied the young commander. "We're using maximum deceleration as it is. Photon sails, plus ion drive."

"What about using the atomic reaction rockets as well?" asked the admiral, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"We just don't have the reaction mass to spare," said the commander. "Photon sails, of course, cost no fuel, and the ion rockets use very little, but with the ion drive going, and three weeks left till planetfall, we can't use the rockets for even an hour. Besides—"

"Besides, our course is already plotted, and we'd undershoot," said ben Ezra. "David, David, don't you know when an old man is talking just to let off steam?"

The young commander fidgeted with embarrassment.

"Nevertheless," said the Grand Admiral, rubbing the end of his long nose, "I wish we could. It's going to be a close thing."

"Why, sir?"

Jacob ben Ezra lit a fifth cigarette. "The *Outward Bound* left Earth just about when we did. They're scheduled to stop at Maxwell. No doubt, the *SS-185* will put Ching off somewhere before they get to Toehold. My guess is that it'll be Maxwell."

"So, sir?"

Ben Ezra exhaled a great cloud of smoke.

"Sorry, David," he said. "Somehow, I'm beginning to find it difficult to remember that not everyone is as old as I am. The *Outward Bound* is one of the oldest trade-ships around; in fact, if my memory serves me correctly, it was the *first* one built specifically for the purpose. Her captain is Peter Reed. He's been in space longer than *I* have."

"Longer than *you,* sir?"

Ben Ezra laughed. It was not the laugh of an old man. It felt good to laugh, especially under the circumstances.

"Yes, my incredulous young friend," he said, "longer than I have. Reed is one of the cleverest captains in space. Also, don't forget, he has the force field to sell, this trip."

"You mean you think Maxwell will trade *Ching* for the force field? But, sir, once they find out why Ching's out here, *no one* would trade him for *anything.*"

Jacob ben Ezra puckered his leathery lips. "You are assuming that Dr. Ching will talk. I doubt that very much. He knows that we'd follow him to Andromeda, if we had to. My guess is that he'll figure his only hope is to change ships as often as possible, and not tell *anyone* why he's on the run."

"Then why would Captain Reed accept him in trade?"

"Because," said the Grand Admiral, raising his bushy white eyebrows, "Reed is clever *and* experienced. He will *know* that anyone who is being pursued by us, all the way from Earth, is someone who has something of vital importance."

Jacob ben Ezra crushed his cigarette against the bulkhead. He shook his head violently.

"If only he knew," he said, "if only he *knew*."

The *Outward Bound* orbited low over Maxwell. She was an untidy spectacle—one great central cylinder, around whose girth the space gigs were clustered; three lesser cylinders, connected to the main body only by spars; the conning globe; and, far astern, the propulsion reactor, a dull black globe, behind which sprouted two sets of rockets—the small, almost inconspicuous ion drive, and the great reaction rockets, which fed off whatever reaction mass happened to be in the huge fuel tanks, located just forward of the reactor.

To make the whole thing even more messy looking, the main cylinder and its auxiliaries were pocked with globes, tubes and blisters, looking for all the world like budding yeast under a microscope. Like Topsy, the successful tradeship just *grew,* adding a cylinder here, a globe there, a blister in another place, as the ship's fortune waxed. In deep space, where friction was no factor, this wild messiness was a status symbol, a sign of prosperity.

Now, Maxwellian ships were coming and going constantly, bringing thorium, food, water, scientists. They had one great navigational hazard to overcome. Four mile-long spars sprouted from amidships on the main cylinder. During acceleration away from a sun, or deceleration towards a sun, four immense triangles of ten-molecule-thick plastic would stretch from the spars, catching the energy of photon packets outward bound from light sources. By grams-per-square-yard, the solar sails provided negligible thrust, but cumulatively, over two square miles of surface area, they were good for a steady, if mild, acceleration. Besides, the energy they provided was free.

But now, since the spars were empty, and the ship was spinning about its central axis, the spars were the arms of a monstrous windmill, which the Maxwellian ships had to avoid.

Captain Reed smiled as he watched the ships thread their way gingerly toward the *Outward Bound.* No doubt, there were simple ways of making the spars stationary while the ship spun, perhaps using the same circle-in-circle bearings that served to immobilize the conning globe. But no starship *he* had ever heard of had bothered to try. It was just too amusing watching the planethogs dodge the whirling spars.

Well, this would be the last day they'd have to brave the whirlwind. The last of the thorium was aboard, the Maxwellians had their force field and hot-cold technique, and Ching would be coming aboard on the last ship.

None too soon, either, thought Peter Reed. Ben Ezra will be here in another ten days. Ten days to get here, perhaps a week or two to break

Horvath. Captain Reed had few illusions about *that* individual. Within three weeks, at the outside, Jacob ben Ezra would know that Ching pen Yee was aboard the *Outward Bound.*

Ben Ezra would be able to close the gap to a week or less, at the next planetfall, Nuova Italia, only ten light-years away.

But by that time, thought Reed, I'll know whether Ching's worth keeping. If he isn't, ben Ezra can have him at Nuova Italia. But if he is…well, ben Ezra will probably have to take on supplies at Nuova Italia. We can get away from him once more, if we have to. But…he can catch us easily, and wherever we head, he can be there before us, with us only having a couple of days lead.

We'll jump off that bridge when we come to it, thought Captain Reed.

"Dr. Ching is aboard," came a voice from the communicator.

"Good," said Reed. "How soon can we break orbit?"

"Everything'll be secured in another three hours, Dad."

"Roger!"

"Sorry, sir."

"All right, Roger," said the old man. "Make ready to break orbit as soon as possible. And send Ching to the reception room. Have Olivera there, too. In fact, stall Ching a bit, and have Manny get there a few minutes earlier. Tell him I'll be right down."

"Yes, *sir.*"

"But, Peter," said Manuel Olivera, his dark eyes raised to the ceiling in supplication, "I am *not* a theoretical physicist. I am *not* a mathematician. I am a tinkerer, a librarian, a maker of stinks, a—"

"Manny! Manny! Please!" said the Captain. "I know the whole song and dance by now. Nevertheless, you *are* the *Outward Bound*'s chief scientist."

"Yes, yes," said the small dark-skinned man excitedly, "but you know as well as I do that all that means is that I'm a glorified librarian. We—"

"All right, all right. All I want you to do is *be* here, and pay attention. This Dr. Ching has something of value, I'm *sure* of it. And we may not have him very long. We've got to be quick, and—"

"Dr. Ching pen Yee to see you, Captain," said an orderly.

"Send him in."

Dr. Ching was a small, though well-built, man of about sixty. His straight black hair was parted neatly in the middle. Only his shifting eyes betrayed his nervousness.

"Thank you for accepting my passage, Captain Reed," he said.

"Not at all, Dr. Ching. Frankly, we hope you may be of value to us. As you know, the lifeblood of a tradeship is knowledge. We sell it, and we buy it. To be blunt, we have *bought* you from Maxwell. You get passage with us, for as long as you want, and in return, we expect you to share your knowledge."

"But, Captain," said Ching nervously, "I am a mathematical physicist. You are engaged in the business of selling practical technological knowledge. We mathematical physicists are not noted for producing marketable knowledge."

Reed frowned. This Ching was cool, and he was scared. A tough combination to crack.

"Please let Mr. Olivera and myself be the judge of that. By the way, I believe I've forgotten to introduce you. This is Manuel Olivera, our chief scientist."

"How do you do, Mr. Olivera," said Ching smoothly. "Captain Reed, really you are wasting your time. I am purely a theorist."

Reed wondered if he should spring his knowledge of Admiral ben Ezra's pursuit. He decided it could wait.

"Suppose you just tell us what you're working on?" he said.

Ching fidgeted. "Mathematical theory," he said.

"Come now, Dr. Ching," snapped Olivera, "we are not complete scientific ignoramuses, you know. What sort of theory?"

"A development of a small corollary to the Special Theory of Relativity."

"Oh?" said Olivera. "Involving what?"

Ching's eyes flickered from focus to focus like a bird's. "Involving …some work with transfinite substitutions," he said vaguely.

Olivera continued his pursuit. "Transfinite substitutions? Where? For what?"

Ching laughed falsely. "Really, Mr. Olivera," he said. "It's all a complicated mathematical exercise. It amuses me to substitute infinite and transfinite numbers for some of the variables. As I said, nothing practical."

"Just why are you doing this?" snapped Olivera.

"Really," said Ching blandly, "that's an unanswerable question. Indeed. Why do men climb mountains? Because they are there. Really, gentlemen, I'm quite tired. May I be excused?"

Olivera was about to continue his sortie, but the captain waved him off.

"Of course," he said. "We will soon be leaving for Nuova Italia. In about two hours. We will have time to talk again, before we all go into Deep Sleep. By all means, rest up."

"Thank you, Captain," said Ching. An orderly was called, and he led Ching off.

"Well, Manny?" asked the captain.

"Well, *what?* Am I a mind reader? Gibberish. Vagueness. Perhaps outright lies. I ask you, Peter, would Jacob ben Ezra travel fifty light-years after someone engaged in 'a complicated mathematical exercise'? Would Earth give a damn?"

"Of course not," said the captain.

"Then why in space didn't you tell him that you knew ben Ezra was after him?" snapped Olivera.

Peter Reed smiled thinly. "Time enough for that between now and Deep Sleep. That's a whole week. I think the strategic time to spring it is just before he goes into Deep Sleep. Impending Deep Sleep makes a man realize just how dependent he can be."

"You'd *better* loosen him up then," said Olivera, "because it's just possible that when we wake up, we'll find ben Ezra right on our tails."

A three-minute burst on the huge reaction rockets kicked the *Outward Bound* out of orbit.

As she drifted slowly outward, the huge triangular photon sails were reeled out onto the mile-long spars, blotting out whole sectors of stars.

The pale, almost invisible, blue stream of the ion drive shot noiselessly, vibrationlessly out of the nozzles.

The *Outward Bound* was on her way to Nuova Italia.

During the next week, the ship would be secured, the automatic systems checked, re-checked, and finally given command of the ship. There would be a final course correction, and then the thousand men, women and children who made up the crew of the *Outward Bound* would go into Deep Sleep.

Deep Sleep was the technique that had given Man that insignificant portion of the Galaxy which he possessed. A starship could accelerate to nearly three-quarters the speed of light, but this took over a year, and, although it had been proven true that subjective time on a fast-moving starship *did* contract, as Einstein had predicted, the factor was still far too short. The spaces between the suns would still eat up lifespans.

Deep Sleep had been developed to deal with this dilemma. Partly it was a technique developed from yoga, partly it was simply a careful, controlled lowering of the body temperature, till life slowed down to the barest crawl. The elements of the technique had been known even before rudimentary spaceflight. But it took the technical integration of all the factors to make Deep Sleep an effective and relatively safe form of suspended animation, and to give Man the stars.

Peter Reed was getting disgusted. It was now time to go into Deep Sleep, and still no one had been able to get anything out of Ching. Clearly, the man was scared silly.

Well, thought Reed, maybe I can shock him out of it now.

He was standing in one of the Deep Sleep chambers. The walls were lined with transparent plastic cubicles, coffin-sized, honeycombed with passages, through which liquid oxygen was passed.

Another of the ship's economies, thought the captain. The same oxygen that served as the ship's air supply was cooled by the cold of space, and used to freeze the Deep Sleep chambers. It took a lot of liquid oxygen, in fact, the entire ship's supply, but since no one would be needing it while the crew was in Deep Sleep, and since it was reusable, it made a neat saving.

Most of the crew were already in Deep Sleep. The cubicles were filled with frozen crewmembers, the Environment Masks snugly fitted over their faces. Only the skeleton Deep Sleep detail, the captain and Dr. Ching remained unfrozen. Now, the captain and the passenger would take their places, and then the automatics would handle the Deep Sleep detail.

A crewman was escorting Ching to his cubicle. The mathematician's face was pasty and pale. His eyes flickered furiously over the frozen figures in the plastic coffins.

Reed smiled, half in sympathy, half in satisfaction. He had spent a total time of nearly seven hundred years in those cubicles. Still, it always made him shudder a bit. But Ching had only experienced Deep Sleep once, and somehow, the second time was always the hardest.

"Well, Dr. Ching," he called out, "how do you feel?"

"A bit foolish, Captain. I must admit that I am afraid, and yet there is really nothing to be afraid of."

For a moment, Reed's distaste for Ching was washed away. The Grand Admiral of Earth's fleet had hounded him across fifty light-years, and now he was facing what must to him be a great irrational fear. And yet, he's so calm.

"I don't see why a man like *you* should be afraid," said the captain deliberately, hating what he was doing.

"Captain?"

"Well, it seems to me that a man who's being chased across the Galaxy by Jacob ben Ezra, and still refuses to tell me *why*, must have a surplus of guts."

For a moment, Ching trembled. Then he smiled slowly. "I *thought* you knew," he said. "Why else would you be so interested in me?"

"Why don't you tell me what this is all about, Ching? What are you on to? Why is Earth so concerned? I don't expect you to believe that we're your *friends* but surely you must realize that it's in our interest as traders to protect you if you're working on something important."

Ching sighed heavily. "Captain Reed," he said, "Earth is not after me because they *want* what I'm working on. I'm really not working on anything practical at all. Just a mathematical and physical concept."

"And yet, they're chasing you farther than they've ever chased a fugitive before."

"Yes," said Ching. "Captain, some day you may know why I must keep my secret. If Jacob ben Ezra catches up to us, you will be *glad* that I've remained silent."

"Why, man, why?"

"Because," said Ching, "I'm fairly certain that ben Ezra has orders to kill anyone who knows what I know."

The Captain frowned. "Perhaps you will change your mind when we come out of Deep Sleep at Nuova Italia."

"Perhaps, Captain, *you* will change *yours*."

Peter Reed shrugged irritably. "Let's get on with it," he said to the attendant.

He climbed into his cubicle, and settled himself on the foam-rubber mattress. The attendant secured him with clamps. The ship's spin would stop when the crew was in Deep Sleep. There would be no gravity.

The soft, lined mask was fitted over his face. He inhaled the soothing tranquilizer vapor. He was comfortable, content. He vaguely felt the prick of a needle, then his senses began to dull, first sight, then sound, then feel, then smell. The last sensation was a dry taste in his mouth, and then that was gone, and he was an entity within himself, in his own private universe ...a mote swimming in the sea of himself...and then, even the sense of mind began to dull...to fade...to softly melt away, like a mouthful of cotton candy.

A blinding redness which pervaded the universe...a pins-and-needles feeling...then warmth, overwhelming, welcome warmth, motion, smell, sound.

Jacob ben Ezra sat up in his Deep Sleep cubicle, slowly, patiently teaching his old eyes to focus.

You never get really used to it, he thought. What year is this? Let's see...Maxwell to Nuova Italia means fourteen years in Deep Sleep, and when we left Maxwell, it was 3297 A.D., or '98? On Earth...

Ben Ezra gave a dry little laugh. Time! What is time? Does it matter? I am eighty years old, I am eight hundred years old, or maybe a thousand.

This life means giving up many things. A firm sense of time is one of them. The people who've sent me after Ching, back on Earth, are all dead. I'm a ghost, a shade, the expression of the will of a group of men, all of whom are dead—in a sense.

Man was not meant for this kind of life, thought Jacob ben Ezra sourly. This is a poor way to command the stars, a poor and pitiful way.

He laughed bitterly. This is a life fit only for Gypsies and Jews. Come to think of it, Gypsies don't have a sufficient sense of history, in the long run.

Maybe that's why so many in the Fleet are Jews. To a Jew, a thousand years is supposed to be a reasonable length of time. Or so the legends say. So they say.

But what is a Jew? There is no such thing as Judaism, anymore. There is hardly such a thing as race.

A Jew, thought Jacob ben Ezra, nowadays is anyone who thinks of himself as one. *Homo interstellarus.*

Ben Ezra leaned on the shoulders of a waiting attendant, and climbed down from the cubicle. His legs were a bit rubbery, but he was used to it.

Homo interstellarus, he thought, as he made his way slowly to the conning globe, lousy Latin, but very good sense.

It was as if Jews had been training to man the Great Fleet for five thousand years. How long had they been a self-contained culture, independent of geography, living, even, in their own time stream? In the pre-stellar past, they had been feared for it, damned for it, but now, it had a purpose. Who else could isolate themselves on the twenty ships of the Great Fleet, but Jews? Knowing no planet, no time to call home?

"They, they," mumbled the Admiral. Why not *we,* he thought. Heh! Peter Reed is as much a Jew as I am. What does it mean now? It means the exiles, the planetless ones, the timeless ones, defying the Universe, spitting in the face of Einstein himself.

The steps of Jacob ben Ezra became firm and sprightly. He lit a cigarette.

"Feels good!" he said to no one in particular.

Several men were already in the conning globe—Chief Navigator Richard Jacoby, several minor crewmen, and his aide, David Steen.

"They're there, sir," said Steen. "We've got a fix on 'em."

The admiral frowned. This job was getting more odious to him every minute.

"How far behind are we?" he asked.

"About six days."

"Then they haven't made orbit yet?"

"No, sir."

"Good. That means we can keep an eye on them. Jacoby, is it possible for them to get away?"

The tall, thin navigator frowned. "Depends on what you mean, Admiral. Wherever they go, of course, we can track them. Do you mean will we catch up to them before they leave orbit? Then, I'd have to say no, not if they're trying to get away."

"Can we *stop* them?" said the Admiral.

"You mean *destroy* them, sir?"

"I don't mean make love to 'em, Jacoby! I know we can destroy them, but can we get close enough to disable 'em, carefully, without killing?"

"Hard to say, at six days distance."

"That's what I was afraid of. Well, tomorrow, we'll radio 'em to heave-to and wait for us."

"Do you think they will, sir?" asked Steen.

"That depends, David, that depends. If they know why we're after Ching, they'll do *anything* to keep him. But, then, they may not know. In which case, they won't take any silly chances."

"And if they try to get away?"

Grand Admiral ben Ezra frowned. "If they try to get away, we have two choices. We can blast 'em, or we can plot their next course, and be waiting for 'em. Six days, we can easily make up on the next hop. The thing is, if we *do* blast 'em, and can't confirm that Ching was aboard, then we'll have to backtrack to Maxwell, maybe even back to Earth, and we'll never really *know*."

"But, sir," said Steen, "do you really think Reed would risk his ship for Ching, *even if* he found out?"

Jacob ben Ezra laughed, and shook his head. "I'm not sure," he said, "but I am sure that Captain Reed is as clever as I am. Which means, if he *does* find out, he'll know that we can't blast him without *knowing* that Ching is aboard. If he finds out, he'll run all right. And you know something, David?"

"What, sir?"

The Admiral lit another cigarette. "I'd do the same thing myself," he said.

Captain Peter Reed cursed loudly. "Just great, just wonderful! Six days away! Six days away, and that bloody sphinx of a Ching hasn't—I've a good mind to call it a business loss and turn him over to ben Ezra."

"Sir," said the radioman fearfully, "Admiral ben Ezra is still calling—"

"Put it through to this 'visor, but *don't* answer. And stop all communications with Nuova Italia. I want it to look like our radio's dead."

"Yes, sir."

"Roger!" said Reed into the communicator. "Prepare to break orbit immediately, and stand by. And get Ching up to the conning globe on the double!"

"But, sir, Ching has never been in zero gravity before, he—"

"Drag him up here by the hair, if you have to!"

It was only three minutes later when Roger Reed hauled a green-looking Ching into the conning globe.

"Captain," said Ching, "is this *really* necessary? I—"

"I want you to hear something, my tight-lipped friend," said the scowling Peter Reed. "I want you to hear it directly."

He turned on the televisor. The tired, wizened face of Jacob ben Ezra filled the screen. Ching paled, even through his nausea.

"....Calling the *Outward Bound*...Calling the *Outward Bound.* Calling Captain Peter Reed..."

The pale visage on the televisor paused to light a cigarette.

"Really, Peter," said Jacob ben Ezra, "this is ridiculous. I know you're reading me."

Peter Reed could not help smiling.

"Very well, Peter," said the voice of ben Ezra, "we'll play it your way. So *don't* answer me. *I'll* do the talking. You probably have a Dr. Ching pen Yee aboard. I want him. I've come all the way from Earth for him, and, by space, I'll have him, or I'll blow you to bits. You have five minutes, plus the time lag, to answer. If you don't answer *then,* I will take appropriate action."

Captain Reed turned the televisor off.

"Well, Dr. Ching," he said, "do I turn you over to ben Ezra, or do you talk?"

A new emotion crossed Ching's face. It did not seem to be fear, it was more of a manic defiance.

"You don't understand. I do not care about death, Captain," he said. "I have not fled to save my life. Had I remained on Earth, my life would not have been endangered. But—"

"But *what?* You heard the Admiral. You have five minutes to make up your mind."

Ching sighed. "It is my work that must go on. *That's* what they want to stop. Very well, Captain, I must take the chance."

"So?"

"There is no simple way of explaining it. I have told you that I am working on a corollary to the Special Theory of Relativity. It is the Special Theory of Relativity, as you must know, which limits all speed to the speed of light. Essentially, it means that at the speed of light, mass is infinite, therefore it would take an infinite thrust to accelerate to that limit, and exceeding it would be impossible. But, as I have said, I am working on transfinite substitutions. I hope to evolve an equation—"

"Come to the point, man, come to the point!"

"There is no simple point, Captain. I am engaged in the preliminaries of a work that some day may lead to a theoretical means of exceeding the speed of light within the Einsteinian Universe—"

"An Overdrive!" shouted Captain Reed.

"Not for a long time," said Ching pedantically. "It—"

But the captain was no longer listening. *An Overdrive!* Countless others had tried before, but Earth thought that *this* man was close enough to send ben Ezra sixty light-years to…

Reed's trader's brain analyzed the situation with the speed born of commercial instinct. An Overdrive would be the most valuable commodity any trader ever had to sell. The *Outward Bound* could sell it again and again, on each of the sixty-seven planets inhabited by Man, each time commanding a price undreamed of in all history!

And ben Ezra would not take the chance that Ching *wasn't* on the *Outward Bound.* He would have to *know.* He couldn't…

"Hang on to something," shouted Peter Reed.

He yelled into the communicator: "Break orbit! *Do it now!*"

"What course, sir?" came the tinny voice.

"Who cares?" roared Reed. "Just get us away from here. Raise the sails, activate the ion drive. Maximum thrust on the reaction rockets! Do it now! Now! *Now!* NOW!"

Jacob ben Ezra shook his head, with a Gallic shrug. Reed was running. What else could he do? But that means he *knows.* It must!

Ben Ezra lit a cigarette. "Change course," he said to his navigator. "Accelerate. Follow them."

"Are we going to attack?" asked Commander Dayan, floating alongside the admiral in the conning globe. His dark, mustachioed face was alight with an eagerness that ben Ezra found distasteful. But then, one could not really blame Dayan. Gunnery officers usually have nothing to do but sit around.

"Not now, at any rate," said the admiral. "Better strap in. Acceleration coming up."

Ben Ezra stared out the viewport at the stars.

My stars, he thought. *Our* stars. Mine and Peter Reed's. No wonder my stomach isn't in this. Reed and I have been in space longer than anyone else. In eight hundred years, we've met just five times, and yet…

And yet, I feel closer to him than to all the politicians on Earth. What do *they* know about the stars? All they're interested in is preserving their petty little planet's rule over Man. They wouldn't know what an Overdrive would mean. It would mean that Man would have the Galaxy, it would mean that one wouldn't have to be a pariah, a man without a planet or a time, to be a starman.

But is that what they think of? Huh! All they see is the end of Earth's control. Of course, they're right. The only thing that makes Earth undisputed master is *time.* Earth is always generations ahead of the planets. Its head start in technology will hold up forever—

But not if there should be an Overdrive—not if Man could go from Earth to the outer ring in months, not centuries.

He glanced at David Steen, strapped in beside him. Young but intelligent. Some day—

"It's a dirty business, David," he said, almost involuntarily.

"Sir?"

"I said it's a dirty business. I never thought I'd be a hired murderer."

"But, sir, we have orders. It's a military mission. You have no reason to blame—"

"Orders! The orders of men who are all dead by now. The orders of an Earth that doesn't even give a damn about the possibility of Man *really* having the stars. Orders to destroy, orders of a willful, selfish…ah!"

"Admiral ben Ezra, our orders are simply to make sure Dr. Ching doesn't escape. Not necessarily to kill anyone. Besides, we're—"

"Yes," said ben Ezra bitterly, "yes, I know. We're soldiers." A new and narrow look came into his large gray eyes.

"But you have a point, David," he said. "Our orders are simply to bring back Ching, and eliminate all knowledge of his work. They don't say anything about blowing up traders, do they? I've not been ordered to kill Peter Reed."

"No, sir."

"No, indeed," said the admiral slowly.

"By all space," he roared, "we're going to carry out our orders! But we're going to do it without killing Captain Reed!"

"Well," said Manuel Olivera, "where do we go from here?"

"Out to the outer ring, I suppose," said Peter Reed. "We are in a very peculiar position. I'm *sure* that ben Ezra won't blast us without boarding. He's got to make sure he gets Ching. But wherever we go, he can plot our course, and be there first. Whatever we do, we've got to do it between now and the next planetfall."

He leaned his face in both hands, propped upon his elbows on the mahogany desk top.

Ching sat nervously in front of him, and Olivera paced the room.

"I still don't see *why* Earth wants to stop you, Dr. Ching," said Olivera.

"In a way, I do," replied Ching. "Positively speaking, the Overdrive would mean the inevitable end of Earth's domination. Without the time differential, Earth would be just another planet."

He managed a small grin. "But on the other hand," he said, "scientifically speaking, they're being most foolish. I am perhaps twenty years from an equation from which an Overdrive could be developed. All I have, right now, is a new point of view. For a thousand years, men have been searching for an Overdrive, always trying to escape from the Einsteinian Universe.

Sometimes they look for a mythical thing called hyperspace, or subspace, or the fourth dimension. What I have done, is simply to begin an inquiry, *within* Relativity Theory, modifying not the equation, but the substitutions."

"What is all that about?" snapped Olivera.

"I'm not sure yet," said Ching abstractedly. "But basically, if you accept the Special Theory of Relativity, the reason that the speed of light cannot be exceeded is that mass is infinite at the speed of light, hence it would take an infinite force to accelerate it to that speed.

"*But,* if there were a drive whose thrust was a function of the mass it was accelerating, then, as mass increased, thrust would increase, and at the speed of light, theoretically, where mass was infinite, *thrust* would also be infinite. And if the thrust-mass equation involved a suitable exponential function—in theory, anyway—thrust could become *transfinite.*"

"Making it possible to go faster than light!" said Olivera excitedly. "Yes, yes, Dr. Ching. If there ever is an Overdrive, it will have to be developed along those lines! Tell me, how close are you?"

Ching laughed bitterly. "As I said, perhaps as much as twenty years away. Who can tell? Right now, all I have is a point of view, a direction in which to proceed. I must experiment with substitutions, then I must develop the proper thrust-mass equation. And at that point, the real work only begins. I must then develop a theoretical basis for a drive that can utilize the thrust-mass equation, a drive where, not only does thrust depend on mass, but in the precise proper function as well. It's a very long way off."

"But, man, it would be an Overdrive!"

"Not even then," said Ching. "That would be the end of *my* work, and the beginning of someone else's. I am not a practical scientist. Someone else would have to take my equations and develop the actual Overdrive."

He sighed and shrugged. "That's why I can't understand why Earth won't let me be. All I want is to be free to develop my equations. It's my whole life! I could build no drive, I—"

"When you rule an empire of more than sixty planets, over a time differential of over two hundred years," said Captain Peter Reed, "you must plan and plot far ahead. You must take a very long view."

"Well, now that we know what we've got," said Olivera, "what are we going to do about it?"

Captain Reed drummed his fingers nervously on the desk top. "I'll be damned if I know," he said. "Fact: an Overdrive would be the greatest commercial coup in history. Fact: it would take about twenty years to develop one, from the start we have. And finally, fact: we will *have* to let ben Ezra aboard on our next planetfall. He'll be waiting for us, and there'll be no escaping. That's why he's let us get this far. This, gentlemen, is what is known as a bind."

"Time," said Ching absently, "why does it always come down to time? The Overdrive wouldn't even be necessary, if it weren't for the time factor. Then Earth would've let me continue my work unmolested. And now, it's a matter of time before ben Ezra gets me, too little time—"

"You're a mathematician," said Peter Reed. "You should know that time underlies the Universe, space…history—"

"Time," said Olivera. "Peter, we've just *got* to save the Overdrive! It's bigger than us; it's bigger even than the *Outward Bound.* It's bigger than Earth! We've just got to buy the time, *somehow.*"

"Twenty years," said Peter Reed. "In twenty *days,* we'll have to go into Deep Sleep, or we'll run the risk of depleting our oxygen, our food, our water. And when we come out, Jacob ben Ezra will be waiting for us."

A slow, grim smile parted Ching's tight lips. "Twenty years—" he said slowly. "Captain, where are we heading?"

"Out to the outer ring, maybe to Toehold."

"And how long will such a trip take?"

"About a hundred and twenty years."

"Captain," said Ching, "we don't *all* have to go into Deep Sleep, do we? There would be enough food and air for, say, one man to stay awake, for say, *twenty years?*"

Peter Reed suddenly became aware of the feverish glow of the abstract fanatic in Ching's eyes.

"You mean you would stay out of Deep Sleep? You would die in space, in the nothing between the stars? You would be alone, *utterly alone,* for twenty years."

"I am well aware of the consequences, Captain. Nevertheless, it would enable me to complete my work. *That* is all that matters. Could it be done?"

Reed stared wonderingly at the small man. "Sure. There'd be plenty of food and air for one man to do it. By a factor of ten, at least."

"Well then, Captain?"

"Are you sure, Dr. Ching? It's one thing to talk about it now, but when you've been alone for one, five, ten years—"

"I am willing to take that chance."

"Well…we could rig up a cubicle so that you could go into Deep Sleep any time it got to be too much for you—"

"Why, he might complete his work, and still make it to Toehold!" cried Olivera.

"He might," said Reed. "Of course, even then, we would still have the problem of dealing with ben Ezra—"

"Oh, space, Peter!" yelled Olivera. "One thing at a time. This is it! This is the *only* way!"

"I suppose you're right, Manny. Have your boys set up the necessary automatics. Let Dr. Ching get acquainted with our computer."

"Thank you, Captain," said Ching. "We will beat them, after all."

"Perhaps," said Reed. Is your *we* the same as my *we,* he thought; is your *them* the same as my *them?*

Olivera had ceased his pacing. He appeared lost in thought.

"Manny," said the captain, reading his old friend's mood. "Manny, what is it?"

"Dr. Ching," said Olivera, "what will we have when your work is finished, I mean, what end result?"

"Why, I hope, an equation giving a principle upon which an Overdrive could be built," said Ching gravely.

"A *principle,*" said Olivera slowly, "an *equation*. But not *plans,* not *blueprints*, not even a schematic diagram."

"What do you expect of me?" said Ching plaintively. "I'm a mathematician, not an engineer. Such a thing would take a pragmatic scientist, working hand in hand with—"

"Yes," said Manuel Olivera, "so it would."

"Manny!" shouted the captain. "You wouldn't—"

"I must, Peter. I must! Someone must. We've got to have more than an equation, when we run into ben Ezra. If we've got pragmatic plans, we can send out all six of our gigs to Toehold. It's an undeveloped planet, they'd never be able to do anything with an equation. But plans— And ben Ezra would have to destroy seven targets, instead of one. Someone would get through."

"It would not be as bad for him, Captain, as it will be for me," said Ching. "He could stay in Deep Sleep until I was ready for him. It would only be a few years for him."

"All right, Manny," said Reed, "you win."

But even as he gave the orders for setting up the automatics, something was nagging at the back of his mind.

Disperse the plans indeed! Sacrifice the *Outward Bound!* There must be a better way. Perhaps, ben Ezra could be fooled—just this once. What if he *got* Ching? Might it not be possible to convince him that Ching had never talked? Perhaps, perhaps—

Even as the nothingness of Deep Sleep overtook him, Peter Reed was still dreaming of the greatest commercial coup in history.

Jacob ben Ezra was dissatisfied, and he didn't know why. His ship was already orbiting Toehold, the *Outward Bound* had been spotted, a week away, all was set, and within eight days, he would have Ching.

But somehow, he felt dissatisfied.

"David," he said, "I feel *dirty.*"

"But, sir, why?"

Ben Ezra lit a cigarette, the thirtieth of the twenty-four-hour period. As far as he could remember, it was a record for him.

"We're men of space, David," he said. "We're no more emotionally bound to Earth than Reed is. *Homo interstellarius,* I think of us as. An Overdrive is something we should welcome, not suppress."

The young commander was silent. To him, ben Ezra knew, orders were orders. He had been born aboard ship, the Fleet was all he knew or cared about. And the Fleet was an agent of Earth.

"Don't you see, David? Of course you don't! Our duty as officers is clear—to obey orders. But we have a duty as men, as well. And, by space, that duty is to preserve the Overdrive!"

"You would disobey direct orders, sir?"

"No, dammit! I've been in this service all my adult life. Orders must be obeyed. If the Fleet decided to take the law into its own hands, we'd be no better than pirates. No, David, orders must be obeyed. But that doesn't mean I have to like it. It won't help me sleep any better, or enable me to smoke less of these infernal cigarettes."

"No, sir."

"I almost hope...I almost hope—"

"What, sir?"

Ben Ezra grinned humorlessly. "I almost hope Peter Reed can figure out a good way to trick me. I'd almost like to see him get out of it."

Manuel Olivera held the sheaf of papers in front of him. "Seven years!" he said. "Seven awful, lonely years, the two of us working together. But here it is, here it is!"

Peter Reed looked in wonderment at Olivera. His hair was now flecked with gray. He had lost fifteen pounds. But the greatest change was in his eyes. There was a haunted fire, an emptiness. What those seven years must've been like, thought Reed.

"And now he's dead," said Olivera. "Dead of old age."

"But did he get into the cubicle?" asked Reed. It was essential to have Ching's body.

"Yes, he got in. But he was a broken old man. Even as I watched him go under, I knew he would never survive the thaw." Olivera sighed heavily. "It was hard for me, but what was it for him! Twelve years! Twelve years *alone!* It was a full twelve years before he thawed me out."

"But he did it," said Reed.

"Yes, he did it."

"And now we have ben Ezra to deal with. He's already orbiting Toehold. Six days— Manny?"

"What, Peter?"

"I don't suppose we could rig up an Overdrive? We have plans, blueprints—"

"Not a chance. There's a good three or four years' work, technical experimentation needed, and even if we had the time, we need things we couldn't possibly make ourselves."

Reed shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask. We're sitting on top of a mint—"

"A mint!" roared Olivera. "A mint! Is that all it means to you, a *commodity* to sell? Peter, I didn't think you were such a fool. Is that what Ching died for? To line our pockets?"

"Ching died for that mysterious thing called abstract knowledge, and you know it, Manny," said the Captain. "He didn't care any more about giving the Overdrive to Man than he did about the profit!"

"Profit! You think you can make a profit out of this? Think, Peter, think. What will happen to the *Outward Bound* when Man has the Overdrive? We'll be finished. All tradeships will be finished. We owe our existence to the time lag, as much as Earth's rule does. I thought you realized that from the beginning. I thought you were willing to sacrifice it for Man. I...I was a bigger fool than you are!"

It hit Reed like a piledriver. Manny was right. The Overdrive meant the end of the tradeships. Selling the Overdrive would ultimately be the end of the *Outward Bound*, of the way of life he had followed for close to a thousand objective years.

Peter Reed knew that if the Overdrive became known, he would be the last captain of the *Outward Bound.*

"You're right, Manny," he said. "I suppose that solves our problem. We'll just give it all to ben Ezra."

"*Will we now,* Captain?" sneered Olivera. "Even if you don't care what this means to Man, think of your own hide. What do you think ben Ezra will do if he knows *we* know?"

"Why, he'll—"

"Exactly. He'll kill every one of us. Or at least haul us back to Earth, where the best we can expect is to be imprisoned for the rest of our lives. *Without trial.*"

Reed cursed. It was true. The only thing to do, is to play it through. At least, if we can fool ben Ezra, I can make my own decision.

"Well, Captain?"

"Destroy those plans. But first, microengrave them in some part of the ship, a wall, a toilet, anywhere. Don't even tell me where. I don't want anyone but you to know, till this is over. Then destroy our transmitters. Make it look like they've been out ever since Maxwell, but make it look like an accident."

"What about Ching? Should we destroy the body? Maybe we can convince ben Ezra that he was never aboard."

"Not a chance. I've got it! Rig his cubicle so that it looks like the machinery failed, and he died of old age, *inside* the cubicle. Can you do it?"

Olivera puckered his brows. "Won't be easy," he said, "but I think so."

"Well, that's all we can do until ben Ezra boards."

"You're going to try and convince ben Ezra that Ching never talked? You expect him to be so stupid as to swallow *that?*"

Peter Reed licked his lips.

"No," he said, "but I know Jacob ben Ezra. What I'm banking on, is that he'll try and convince himself."

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Jacob?" said Peter Reed, sitting behind the big mahogany desk.

"To what— Peter, you *know* I've followed you all the way from Maxwell," said Admiral Jacob ben Ezra.

"All the way from Maxwell!" exclaimed Peter Reed. "Why in blazes didn't you give me a call on the...oh, oh! I keep forgetting that the radio's out of commission. Then you *did* call me?"

Ben Ezra looked at his aide, and then at the ceiling. "Yes, I did call you. Is your radio *really* out of order?"

"Freak accident," said Reed. "Meteor hit the radio shack. Small one, but enough to smash things up. Say, you wouldn't have a spare F-46E transmitter housing?"

"I'll see what I can do," said ben Ezra coolly.

"Roger, get us some drinks, will you?"

Roger Reed produced four of the hot-cold cocktails.

"These are most amusing, Jacob," said Captain Reed.

"I left Earth about the same time you did, this time, Peter," said ben Ezra. He lit a cigarette.

"Still smoking those filthy things, eh?" said Peter Reed conversationally.

"*Captain* Reed," said ben Ezra, "aren't you even *interested* in why I've followed you for a hundred light-years?"

Reed laughed. "Something sinister, Jacob? I assumed that when you hailed us at Maxwell, and we didn't answer, you thought we were in trouble, and—"

"Really, Peter!" said ben Ezra. "*I'll* come to the point, even if you won't. Do you have a passenger?"

Peter Reed frowned. "So that's it," he said. "Look, Jacob, we're fully insured for this kind of thing. Million credit liability policy. It's a hefty premium, and the chances of it ever happening are so slight, but—"

"What in blazes are you talking about?"

"Why, our passenger, of course," said Reed blandly. "Isn't that what *you're* talking about? I sure as hell don't know how you found out, but I assure you it was a legitimate accident, and we're fully covered."

"Covered? Accident?"

"Oh, come on, Jacob, stop playing cat and mouse with me!" snapped Reed. "All right, all right, if that's the way you want it, I'll tell you the whole thing as if you didn't know what happened."

"I certainly wish you would," said ben Ezra.

"Well, we *did* have a passenger. Picked him up on Maxwell. Strange little fellow called Ching pen Yee. That director, what was his name?"

"Lazlo Horvath," said David Steen.

"Yes, yes, Horvath. The dirty crook. Told me some kind of fish story about how this Ching was some kind of important scientist. Well, ordinarily, you couldn't fool me with a thing like that, but as you know, we have the force field to sell this trip, and Horvath simply didn't have anything better to pay for it, so I took a chance on this Ching. What a joke!"

"Joke?"

"Yes," said Reed. "Scientist? Why, the man was a raving lunatic! Classic case. Paranoid delusions. Thought the entire Terran hegemony was out to get him. Literally. Not only that, but delusions of grandeur as well. Why, he thought he was the greatest thing since Einstein! Secret of immortality, conversion bomb, all the usual mythical nonsense."

"A madman?" said ben Ezra, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"What a madman!" exclaimed the captain. "To top it all off...why, do you know what, Jacob? He thought he had the secret of Overdrive as well!"

"Really," said ben Ezra, perhaps a shade too dryly.

"I swear, I expected him to pull the Philosopher's Stone itself out of his pocket!" laughed Peter Reed.

"Indeed."

"Where is this Dr. Ching?" said David Steen.

Ben Ezra flashed him a dirty look.

"Ah, you know as well as I do, Jacob, don't you? A one in a million accident, but it *did* happen. The automatics in his Deep Sleep cubicle malfunctioned. He died of old age on the last hop."

"Died?" said ben Ezra slowly.

"I assure you, Jacob, there was no lapse in safety procedures, and we are fully covered."

"To be sure," said ben Ezra. "To be sure." His eyes were even more unreadable than usual.

"Do you by any chance have the body?" he said.

"Yes," replied Reed. "It's still in the cubicle."

"Good. Mr. Ching had relations on Galdwin, which…er…is our next stop. We will take the body to them. David, get a detail."

"But, sir—"

"David!"

"Yes, sir."

"A most unfortunate accident, Peter," said ben Ezra.

"Yes."

"But you say the man was mad anyway," said ben Ezra, bringing his face close to Reed's.

Reed stared back. "Very mad," he said evenly.

"You are *quite* sure?" said ben Ezra.

Reed drummed his fingers nervously on the desk. Ben Ezra's glance fell to Reed's hand, for a short moment. Reed's gaze followed. Then they were staring in each other's eyes again.

"Quite sure," said Peter Reed.

"I see," said Jacob ben Ezra. The corners of his mouth curled upward in the slightest suggestion of a grin.

Reed's mouth went dry.

"Well, Peter," said ben Ezra, suddenly and unexpectedly convivial, "it's been nice meeting you again. Very nice. But I really must be going."

"Sorry to see you leave so soon," said Reed.

"I'll bet you are!" said ben Ezra with a little laugh.

He walked to the door and opened it.

"Good-by, Peter," he said.

"Good-by, Jacob."

As he stepped through the doorway, the Admiral swiveled his neck to face Reed.

"Perhaps," he said dryly, *"I'll be seeing you a lot sooner than you think I think."* Then he was gone.

"What in space did he mean by that, Dad…*sir?"* asked Roger Reed.

The captain stared at the empty doorway.

"I think I know," he said, "but I'm not sure I *want* to know."

Peter Reed floated by the viewport watching ben Ezra's shop break orbit.

He's really going, Reed thought. But he did not feel like congratulating himself.

He *knew*. He *had* to know. Jacob would never have swallowed a cock-and-bull story like that unless he wanted to. Well, he's got Ching's body, and he'll take it back to Earth, and that'll be the end of it. The Overdrive is mine.

But what, he thought, am I going to do with it? The safe thing would be to destroy the plans…or—

It'd take time and money to build it. The *Outward Bound* could never do it alone, but there are planets out here on the outer ring who'd do the work, and not ask too many questions.

Or there's Maxwell. Horvath is dead, but there's never a dearth of his kind. The Overdrive would bring a fantastic price from someone like that. But what would he do with it? Rule the Galaxy?

The Galaxy…who can say anything about the Galaxy? Man has seen such a small piece of it. Naturally, the chance of running into another intelligent race has been nil, as long as we were confined to such a small volume of space. But now— What exists in the center?

Without realizing it, Peter Reed had made his decision.

Ching had died for the Overdrive, thought Reed. Manny's given seven years of his life for it, seven lonely years.

And Jacob—Jacob took the biggest chance of his career to give Man the Galaxy.

Captain Reed sighed resignedly. One doesn't go in for this kind of life unless one is something of a romantic, he thought, no matter what I may say about profits.

What have all the profits been for? Just to keep the *Outward Bound* in space. Why stay in space? What logical answer is there?

Reed remembered a quotation from a man thousands of years dead, so long his name had been forgotten.

"Why climb mountains?" they had asked the mountaineer.

"Because they are there," he had said.

Why go to the stars? *Because they are there*. It was enough.

Manny understood that. In a way, perhaps Ching understood it, too.

And Jacob had risked a thousand-year career so that Man could have the Galaxy. *Because it was there.*

And can I do less, thought Peter Reed. A few hundred light-years of space is no substitute for the Universe.

Roger may never be captain of the *Outward Bound*. The twilight of the tradeships has already begun—

Reed looked sadly out the 'port at ben Ezra's receding ship. Good-by, Jacob, he thought, good-bye to a way of life a thousand years old,

But Man must have the Overdrive.

Jacob ben Ezra watched the green disk of Toehold slowly recede. Hidden on the other side of the planet, now, was the *Outward Bound.*

By now, he thought, Peter will have decided to build an Overdrive.

He laughed softly to himself. We old foxes understand each other. We both have our excuses—Peter his profits, me my duty.

But when it comes down to it, we're both in space for the same reason, and neither of us can put it into words.

So Earth will be satisfied. They'll have the body of poor Ching. Little will they know, little will they know, until it's too late.

There are planets out here that will ask few questions. Peter has the force field to sell, and for that, he can get his Overdrive built. And after that—

After that, in the short run, who knows? Ben Ezra shifted his gaze to the vast, multi-colored cloud of stars that is the center of the Galaxy.

In the short run, who knows, he thought. Who cares? But in the long run—

In the long run, Man will have the Galaxy, perhaps not to himself, *certainly* not to himself, but have it he will.

The Admiral put out his half-finished cigarette. I've been in this business so long, that I'm a legend, he thought. How ironic that the thing I can be most proud of is something that, once the Overdrive is a reality, will be called a failure.

He looked at the cloud of stars. They seemed to be looking right back. Come on, they seemed to say, we've been waiting.

A failure— Maybe you could call it that—

He grinned at the far glow of the Center.

"Coming!" he said.

THE KRAGEN

by Jack Vance (1920 --)
Fantastic, July

Jack Vance, one of science fiction's grand masters, has been delighting science-fiction readers with stories of rich imaginative splendor and coruscating style for more than half a century. His remarkable science-fantasy sequence, *The Dying Earth,* marked him as a major figure as far back as 1950; he followed it with a host of vivid novels—*Big Planet* (1952), *To Live Forever* (1956), the Hugo-winning *The Dragon Masters* (1962), and many others—so that by the time "The Kragen" appeared in 1964 Vance already had the reputation of a long-time veteran. And yet it must be deemed now "early" Vance, because his career has continued a further three and a half decades, giving us such robust series-novels as the Demon Princes books, the Alastor Cluster sequence, the Planet of Adventure series, the Lyonesse novels, and on and on through the well-received *Night Lamp* of 1996 and *Ports of Call* of 1998, with further work in progress as this is written.

"The Kragen" is vintage Vance—a good example of his graceful prose, sardonic wit, and inexhaustible science-fictional inventiveness. He expanded it to full novel length in 1966 as *The Blue World.*

CHAPTER I

Among the people of the Floats caste distinctions were fast losing their old-time importance. The Anarchists and Procurers had disappeared altogether; inter-caste marriages were by no means uncommon, especially when they involved castes of approximately the same social status. Society of course was not falling into chaos; the Bezzlers and the Incendiaries still maintained their traditional aloofness; the Advertisermen still could not evade a subtle but nonetheless general disesteem, and where the castes were associated with a craft or trade, they functioned with undiminished effectiveness. The Swindlers comprised the vast majority of those who fished from coracles; Blackguards constructed all the sponge-arbors in every lagoon; the Hoodwinks completely monopolized the field of hood-winking. This last relationship always excited the curiosity of the young, who would inquire, "Which first: the Hoodwinks or hood-winking?" To which the elders customarily replied, "When the Ship of Space discharged our ancestors upon these blessed floats, there were four Hoodwinks among the Eighty-Three. Later, when the towers were built and the lamps established, there were hoods to wink, and it seemed nothing less than apposite that the Hoodwinks should occupy themselves at the trade. It may well be that matters stood so in the Outer Wildness, before the Escape. It seems likely. There were undoubtedly lamps to be flashed and hoods to be winked. Of course there is much we do not know, much concerning which the dicta are silent."

Whether or not the Hoodwinks had been drawn to the trade by virtue of ancient use, it was now the rare Hoodwink who did not in some measure find his vocation upon the towers, either as a rigger, a lamp-tender, or as a full-fledged Hoodwink.

Another caste, the Larceners, constructed the towers, which customarily stood sixty to ninety feet high at the center of the float, directly above the primary stalk of the sea-plant; there were usually four legs of woven withe, which passed through holes in the pad to join a stout stalk twenty or thirty feet below the surface. At the top of the tower was a cupola, with walls of split withe, a roof of gummed and laminated padskin. Yard-arms extending to either side supported lattices, each carrying nine lamps arranged in a square, three to the side, together with the hoods and trip-mechanisms. Within the cupola, windows afforded a view across the water to the neighboring floats—as much as two miles or as little as a quarter-mile distant. The Master Hoodwink sat at a panel. At his left hand were nine tap-rods, cross-coupled to lamp-hoods on the lattice to his right. Similarly the tap-rods at his right hand controlled the hoods to his left. By this means the configurations he formed and those he received, from his point of view, were of identical aspect and caused him no confusion. During the daytime, the lamps were not lit and white targets served the same function. The hoodwink set his configuration with quick strokes of right and left hands, kicked the release, which thereupon flicked the hoods or shutters at the respective lamps or targets. Each configuration signified a word; the mastery of a lexicon and a sometimes remarkable dexterity were the Master Hoodwink's stock in trade. All could send at speeds approximating that of speech; all knew at least four thousand, and some six, seven or even nine thousand configurations. The folk of the floats could in varying degrees read the configurations, which were also employed in the keeping of the archives, and other communications, memoranda and messages."

On Tranque Float, at the extreme east of the group, the Master Hoodwink was one Chaezy Zander, a rigorous and exacting old man with a mastery of over eight thousand configurations. His first assistant, Sklar Hast, had well over five thousand configurations at his disposal. There were two further assistants, as well as three apprentices, two riggers, a lamp-tender and a maintenance witheweaver, this latter a Larcener. Chaezy Zander tended the tower from dusk until middle evening: the busy hours during which gossip, announcements, news and notifications regarding King Kragen flickered up and down the fifty-mile line of the floats.

Sklar Hast winked hoods during the afternoon; then, when Chaezy Zander appeared in the cupola, he looked to maintenance and supervised the apprentices. A relatively young man, Sklar Hast had achieved his status by working in accordance with a simple and uncomplicated policy: without compromise and with great tenacity he strove for excellence, and sought to instill the same standards into the apprentices. He was an almost brutally direct man, without affability, knowing nothing of either malice, guile, tact or patience. The apprentices disliked but respected him; Chaezy Zander considered him over-pragmatic and deficient in reverence for his betters, notably himself. Sklar Hast cared nothing one way or the other. Chaezy Zander must soon retire; in due course Sklar Hast would become Master Hoodwink. He was in no hurry; on this placid, limpid, changeless world, time drifted rather than throbbed. In the meantime,

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[*] The orthography had been adopted in the earliest days and was highly systematic. The cluster at the left indicated the genus of the idea, the cluster at the right denoted the specific. In such a fashion ... at the left signified *color,* and hence:
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...

White	... .	 .
Black	... .	 .
Red	... .	..
Pink	... .	.. .
Dark red	... .	.. .

and so forth.

life was easy and for the most part pleasant. Sklar Hast owned a small pad of which he was the sole occupant. The pad, a leaf of spongy tissue a hundred feet in diameter braced by tough woody radial ribs, floated in the lagoon, separated from the main float by twenty feet of water. Sklar Hast's hut was of standard construction: sea-plant withe bent and lashed, then sheathed with sheets of pad-skin, the tough near-transparent membrane peeled from the bottom of the sea-plant pad. All was then coated with well-aged varnish, prepared by boiling sea-plant sap until the water was driven off and the resins amalgamated.

On the pad grew other vegetation: shrubs rooted in the spongy tissue, a thicket of bamboo-like rods yielding a good-quality withe, epiphytes hanging from the central spike of the sea-plant—this rising twenty or thirty feet to terminate in a coarse white spore-producing organ. Most of the plants of the pad yielded produce of benefit to man: fruit, fiber, dye, drug or decorative foliage. On other pads the plants might be ordered according to aesthetic theory; Sklar Hast had small taste in these matters, and the center of his pad was little more than an untidy copse of various stalks, fronds, tendrils and leaves, in various shades of black, green and rusty orange.

Sklar Hast reckoned himself a lucky man. As a Hoodwink by caste and assistant Master Hoodwink by trade he enjoyed a not inconsiderable prestige. Standing before his hut, Sklar Hast watched the gold and lavender dusk and its dark pastel reflection in the ocean. The afternoon rain had freshened and cooled the air; now the evening breeze arose to rustle the foliage and brush susurrations across the water… Chaezy Zander was growing old. Sklar Hast wondered how long the old man would persist in fulfilling the rigorous exactitude of his duties. True, he showed no lapse whatever in precision or flexibility of usage, but almost insensibly his speed was falling off. Sklar Hast could out-wink him without difficulty should he choose to do so; a capability which Sklar Hast, for all his bluntness, had so far not demonstrated. Useless folly to irritate the old man! Sklar Hast suspected that even now he delayed his retirement mainly out of jealousy and antipathy toward Sklar Hast.

There was no hurry. Life seemed to extend ahead of him as wide and lucid as the dreaming expanse of water and sky which filled his vision. On this water-world, which had no name, there were no seasons, no tides, no storms, no change, very little anxiety regarding time. Sklar Hast was currently testing five or six girls of orthodox Hoodwink background for marital suitability. In due course, he would make a choice, and enlarge his hut. And forever abandon privacy, Sklar Hast reflected wistfully. There was definitely no need for haste. He would continue to test such girls as were eligible, and perhaps a few others as well. Meanwhile, life was good.

In the lagoon hung arbors on which grew the succulent sponge-like organisms which when cleaned, plucked and boiled, formed the staple food of the Float-folk. The lagoon teemed likewise with other edible fish, separated from the predators of the ocean by the enormous net which hung in a great hemisphere from various buoys, pads and the main float—this a complex of ancient pads, compressed, wadded and interlocked to create an unbroken surface five acres in area and varying from two feet to six feet in thickness. There was much other food available: spores from the sea-plant fruiting organ, from which a crusty bread could be baked. There were in addition other flowers, tendrils and bulbs, as well as the prized flesh of the gray-fish to take which the Swindlers must fare forth in their coracles and cunningly swindle from the ocean, which horizon to horizon, pole to pole, enveloped the entire surface of the world.

Sklar Hast turned his eyes up to the skies, where the constellations already blazed with magnificent ardor. To the south, half-up the sky, hung a cluster of twenty-five middle-bright stars, from which, so tradition asserted, his ancestors had fled in the Ship of Space, finally to reach the world of water. Eighty-three persons, of various castes, managed to disembark before the ship foundered and sank; the eighty-three had become twenty thousand, scattered east and west along fifty miles of floating sea-plant. The castes so jealously differentiated during the first few generations, with the Bezzlers at the top and the Advertisermen at the bottom, had now accommodated themselves to one another and were even intermingling. There was little to disturb the easy flow of life; nothing harsh nor unpleasant—except, perhaps, King Kragen.

Sklar Hast made a sour face and examined those three of his arbors which only two days before had been plucked clean by King Kragen, whose appetite as well as his bulk grew by the year. Sklar Hast scowled westward across the ocean, in the direction from which King Kragen customarily appeared, moving with long strokes of his four propulsive vanes, in a manner to suggest some vast, distorted, grotesquely ugly anthropoid form swimming by means of the breast stroke. There, of course, the resemblance to man ended. King Kragen's body was tough black cartilage, a cylinder on a rectangle, from the corners of which extended the vanes. The cylinder comprising King Kragen's main bulk opened forward in a maw fringed with four mandibles and eight palps, and aft in an anus. Atop this cylinder, somewhat to the front, rose a turret from which the four eyes protruded: two peering forward, two aft. During Sklar Hast's lifetime King Kragen had grown perceptibly, and now measured perhaps sixty feet in length. King Kragen was a terrible force for destruction, but luckily could be placated. King Kragen enjoyed copious quantities of sponges and when his appetite was appeased he injured no one and did no damage; indeed he kept the area clear of other marauding kragen, which either he killed or sent flapping and skipping in a panic across the ocean.

Sklar Hast's attention was attracted by a dark swirl in the water at the edge of the net: a black bulk surrounded by glistening cusps and festoons of starlit water. Sklar Hast ran forward to the edge of the pad, peered. No question about it! A lesser kragen was attempting to break the net that it might plunder the lagoon!

Sklar Hast shouted a curse, shook his fist, turned, ran at full speed across the pad. He jumped into his coracle, crossed the twenty feet of water to the central float. He delayed only long enough to tie the coracle to a stake formed of a human femur, then ran at top speed to the hoodwink tower.

A mile to the west the tower on Thrasneck Float flickered its lamps, the configurations coming with the characteristic style of Durdan Farr, the Thrasneck Master Hoodwink: *"...thirteen...bushels...of...salt...lost... when...a...barge...took...water...between...Sumber...and...Adelvine..."*

Sklar Hast climbed the ladder, burst into the cupola. He pointed to the lagoon. "A rogue, breaking the nets. I just saw him. Call King Kragen!"

Chaezy Zander instantly flashed the cut-in signal. His fingers jammed down rods, he kicked the release. *"Call...King...Kragen!"* he signaled. *"Rogue...in...Tranque...Lagoon!"*

On Thrasneck Float Durden Farr relayed the message to the tower on Bickle Float, and so along the line of floats to Sciona at the far west, who thereupon returned the signal: *"King...Kragen...is...nowhere...at...hand."*

Back down the line of towers flickered the message, returning to Tranque Float in something short of sixty seconds. Sklar Hast read the message as it left the Bickle Tower, before reaching Thrasneck, and rushed over to the side of the cupola, to peer down into the lagoon.

Others had now discovered the rogue kragen and set up a shout to the tower, "Call King Kragen!" Sklar Hast shouted in return, "He can't be found!" Chaezy Zander, tight-lipped, was already dispatching another message: *"To...the...various...intercessors...along...the...line. Kindly... summon...King...Kragen and...direct...him...to...Tranque...Float."*

Sklar Hast pointed and bellowed, "Look! The beast has broken the net! Where is Voidenvo?"

He swung down the ladder, ran to the edge of the lagoon. The kragen, a beast perhaps fifteen feet in length, was surging easily through the water, a caricature of a man performing the breast stroke. Starlight danced and darted along the disturbed water, and so outlined the gliding black bulk. Sklar Hast cried out in fury: the brute was headed for his arbors, so recently devastated by the appetite of King Kragen! It could not be borne! He ran to his coracle, returned to his pad. Already the kragen had extended its palps and was feeling for sponges. Sklar Hast sought for an implement which might serve as a weapon; there was nothing to hand: a few articles fashioned from human bones and fish cartilage. Leaning against the hut was a boat-hook, a stalk ten feet long, carefully straightened, scraped, and seasoned, to which a hook-shaped human rib had been lashed. He took it up and now from the central pad came a cry of remonstrance. "Sklar Hast! What do you do?" This was the voice of Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor. Sklar Hast paid him no heed. He ran to the edge of the pad, jabbed the boat-hook at the kragen's turret. It scraped uselessly along resilient cartilage. The kragen swung up one of its vanes, knocked the pole aside. Sklar Hast jabbed the pole with all his strength at what he considered the kragen's most vulnerable area: a soft pad of receptor-endings directly above the maw. Behind him he heard Semon Voidenvo's outraged protest: "This is not to be done! This is not to be done! Desist!"

The kragen quivered at the blow, twisted its massive turret to gaze at Sklar Hast. Again it swung up its fore-vane, smashing the pole, slashing at Sklar Hast, who leapt back with inches to spare. From the central pad Semon Voidenvo bawled, "By no means molest the kragen; it is a matter for the King! We must respect the King's perquisites."

Sklar Hast stood back in fury as the kragen resumed its feeding. As if to punish Sklar Hast for his assault, it passed close beside the arbors, worked its vanes, and the arbors, sea-plant stalk lashed with fiber, collapsed. Sklar Hast groaned. "No more than you deserve," called out Semon Voidenvo with odious complacence. "You interfered with the duties of King Kragen, now your arbors are destroyed. This is justice."

" 'Justice'? Bah!" bellowed Sklar Hast. "Where is King Kragen? You, Voidenvo the Intercessor! Why don't you summon the great gluttonous beast?"

"Come, come," admonished Semon Voidenvo. "This is not the tone in which to speak of King Kragen."

Sklar Hast thrust himself and his coracle back to the central float, where now stood several hundred folk of Tranque Float. He pointed. "Look. See that vile beast of the sea. He is plundering us of our goods, I say, kill him. I say that we need not suffer such molestation."

Semon Voidenvo emitted a high-pitched croak. "Are you insane? Someone, pour water on this maniac hoodwink, who has too long focused his eyes on flashing lights."

In the lagoon the kragen moved to the arbors of the Belrod family, deep-divers for stalk and withe, of the Advertiserman caste and prone to a rude and surly vulgarity. The Belrod elder, Poe, a squat large-featured man, still resilient and vehement despite his years, emitted a series of hoots, intended to distract the kragen, which instead tore voraciously at the choicest Belrod sponges.

"I say, kill the beast!" cried Sklar Hast. "The King despoils us, must we likewise feed all the kragen of the ocean?"

"Kill the beast!" echoed the younger Belrods.

Semon Voidenvo gesticulated in vast excitement, but Poe Belrod shoved him roughly aside. "Quiet, let us listen to the hoodwink. How would we kill the kragen?"

"Come! I will show you how!"

Thirty or forty men followed him, mostly Swindlers, Advertisermen, Blackguards and Extorters. The remainder hung dubiously back. Sklar Hast led the way to a pile of poles intended for the construction of a storehouse. Each pole, fabricated from withes laid lengthwise and bound in glue, was twenty feet long by eight inches in diameter, and combined great strength with lightness.

Sklar Hast found rope, worked with vicious energy. "Now—lift! Across to my pad!"

Excited by his urgency, the men shouldered the pole, carried it to the lagoon, floated it across to Sklar Hast's pad. Then, crossing in coracles, they dragged the pole up on the pad and carried it across to the edge of the lagoon. At Sklar Hast's direction, they set it down with one end resting on the hard fiber of a rib. "Now," said Sklar Hast. "Now we kill the kragen." He made a noose in the end of a light hawser, advanced toward the kragen, which watched him through the rear-pointing eyes of its turret. Sklar Hast moved slowly, so as not to alarm the creature, which continued to pluck sponges with a contemptuous disregard.

Sklar Hast, crouching, approached the edge of the pad. "Beast!" he called. "Ocean brute! Come closer. Come." He bent, splashed water at the kragen. Provoked, it surged toward him. Sklar Hast waited, and just before it swung its vane, he tossed the noose over its turret. He signaled his men. "Now!" They heaved on the line, dragged the thrashing kragen through the water. Sklar Hast guided the line to the end of the pole. The kragen surged suddenly forward; in the confusion and the dark the men heaving on the rope fell backward. Sklar Hast seized the slack, and dodging a murderous slash of the kragen's fore-vane he flung a hitch around the end of the pole. He danced back. "Now!" he called. "Pull, pull! Both lines! The beast is as good as dead!"

On each of a pair of lines tied to the head of the pole fifteen men heaved. The pole raised up on its base; the line tautened around the kragen's turret, the men dug in their heels, the base of the pole bit into the hard rib. The pole raised, braced by the angle of the ropes. With majestic deliberation the thrashing kragen was lifted from the water and swung up into the air. From those watching on the central pad came a murmurous moan of fascination and dread.

The kragen made gulping noises, reached its vanes this way and that, to no avail. Sklar Hast surveyed the creature, somewhat at a loss as how to proceed. The project thus far had gone with facility: what next? The men were looking at the kragen in awe, uncomfortable at their own daring, and already were stealing furtive glances out over the ocean. Perfectly calm, it glistened with the reflections of the blazing constellations. Sklar Hast thought to divert their attention. "The nets!" he called out to those on the float. "Where are the Extorters? Repair the nets before we lose all our fish! Are you helpless?"

Certain net-makers, a trade dominated by the Extorter caste, detached themselves from the group, went out in coracles to repair the broken net.

Sklar Hast returned to a consideration of the dangling kragen. At his orders the ropes supporting the tilted pole were made fast to ribs on the surface of the pad; the men now gathered gingerly about the dangling kragen, and speculated as to the best means to kill the creature. Perhaps it was already dead? Someone posed the question; a lad of the Belrods prodded the kragen with a length of stalk and suffered a broken collar-bone from a quick blow of the fore-vane.

Sklar Hast stood somewhat apart, studying the creature. Its hide was tough; its cartilaginous tissue even tougher. He sent one man for a boat-hook, another for a sharp femur-stake, and from the two fashioned a spear.

The kragen hung limp, the vanes swaying, occasionally twitching. Sklar Hast moved forward cautiously, touched the point of the spear to the side of the turret, thrust with all his weight. The point entered the tough hide perhaps half an inch, then broke. The kragen jerked, snorted, a vane slashed out. Sklar Hast sensed the dark flicker of motion, dodged and felt the air move beside his face. The spear-shaft hurtled out over the pond; the vane struck the pole on which the kragen hung, bruising the fibers.

"What a quarrelsome beast!" declared Sklar Hast. "Bring more rope; we must prevent any further such demonstrations."

From the main float came a harsh command: "You are mad-men; why do you risk the displeasure of King Kragen? I decree that you desist from your rash acts!"

This was the voice of Ixon Myrex, the Tranque Arbiter, a Bezzler of great physical power and moral conviction, a man with recognized powers and large prestige. Sklar Hast could not ignore Ixon Myrex as he had Semon Voidenvo. He considered the dangling kragen, looked about at the dubious faces of his comrades. They were hesitating; Ixon Myrex was not a man to be trifled with. Sklar Hast walked truculently to the edge of the pad, peered across the intervening water to the shape of Ixon Myrex.

"The kragen is destroying our arbors, Arbiter Myrex. The King is slothful about his duties, hence—"

Ixon Myrex's voice shook with wrath. "That is no way to speak! You violate the spirit of our relationship with King Kragen!"

Sklar Hast said in a reasonable voice, "King Kragen is nowhere to be seen. The Intercessors who claim such large power run back and forth in futility. We must act for ourselves. Cross the water to my pad. Join us in killing this ravenous beast."

Ixon Myrex held up his hands, which trembled in indignation. "Return the kragen to the lagoon, that thereby—"

"That thereby it may destroy more arbors?" demanded Sklar Hast. "This is not the result I hope for." He took a deep breath and made his decision. "Where is the rope?"

Arbiter Myrex called out in his sternest tones, "You men on the pad! This is how I interpret the customs of Tranque Float: the kragen must be restored to the water, with all haste. No other course is consistent with custom."

Sklar Hast waited. There was an uneasy stirring among the men. He said nothing, but taking up the rope, formed a noose. He crawled forward, flipped up the noose to catch a dangling vane, then crawling back and rising to his feet he circled the creature, binding the dangling vanes. The kragen's motions became increasingly constricted and finally were reduced to spasmodic shudders. Sklar Hast approached the creature from the rear, careful to remain out of reach of mandibles and palps, and made the bonds secure. "Now—the vile beast can only squirm. Lower it to the pad and we will find a means to make its end." The guy ropes were shifted, the pole tilted and swung; the kragen fell to the surface of the pad, where it lay passive, palps and mandibles moving slightly in and out. It showed no agitation, nor discomfort; perhaps it felt none: the exact degree of the kragen's sensitivity and ratiocinative powers had never been determined.

In the east the sky was lightening where the cluster of flaring blue and white suns known as Phocan's Cauldron began to rise. The ocean glimmered with a leaden sheen, and the folk who stood on the central pad began to glance furtively along the obscure horizon, muttering and complaining. Some few called out encouragement to Sklar Hast, recommending the most violent measures against the kragen. Between these and certain others furious arguments raged. Chaezy Zander had descended from the tower, to join Semon Voidenvo and Ixon Myrex, obviously in disapproval of Sklar Hast's activity. Of the Caste Elders only Elmar Pronave, Jackleg and Master Witheweaver, defended Sklar Hast and his unconventional acts.

Sklar Hast ignored all. He sat watching the black hulk with vast distaste, furious with himself for having become involved in so perilous a project. What had been gained? The kragen had broken his arbors; he had revenged himself and prevented more destruction. On the other hand he had incurred the ill-will of the most influential folk of the Float, including Ixon Myrex and Chaezy Zander: no small matter. He likewise had involved those others who had trusted him and looked to him for leadership, and toward whom he now felt responsibility.

He rose to his feet. There was no help for it; the sooner the beast was disposed of, the more quickly life would return to normal. He approached the kragen, examined it gingerly. The mandibles quivered in their anxiety to sever his torso; Sklar Hast stayed warily to the side. How to kill the beast?

Elmar Pronave crossed over from the main float the better to examine the kragen. He was a tall man with a high-bridged broken nose and black hair worn in the two ear-plumes of the old Procurer Caste, now no longer in existence save for a few aggressively unique individuals scattered through the floats, who used the caste-marks to emphasize their emotional detachment.

Pronave circled the hulk, kicked at the rear vane, bent to peer into one of the staring eyes. "If we could cut it up, its parts might be of some use."

"The hide is too tough for our knives," growled Sklar Hast. "There's no neck to be strangled."

"There are other ways to kill."

Sklar Hast nodded. "We could sink the beast into the depths of the ocean—but what to use for weight? Bones? Far too valuable. We could load bags with ash, but there is not that much ash to hand. We could burn every hut on the float as well as the hoodwink tower, and still not secure sufficient. To burn the kragen would require a like mountain of fuel."

A young Larcener who had worked with great enthusiasm during the trapping of the kragen spoke forth: "Poison exists! Find me poison, I will fix a capsule to a stick and push it into the creature's maw!"

Elmar Pronave gave a sardonic bark of laughter. "Agreed; poisons exist, hundreds of them, derived from various sea-plants and animals—but which are sufficiently acrid to destroy this beast? And where is it to be had? I doubt if there is that much poison nearer than Sankeston Float."

Sklar Hast went again to survey the black hulk, and now Phocan's Cauldron, rising into the sky, revealed the kragen in fuller detail. Sklar Hast examined the four blind-seeming eyes in the turret, the intricate construction of the mandibles and tentacles at the maw. He touched the turret, peered at the dome-shaped cap of chitin which covered it. The turret itself seemed laminated, as if constructed of stacked rings of cartilage, the eyes protruding fore and aft in inflexible tubes of a rugose harsh substance. Others in the group began to crowd close; Sklar Hast jumped forward, thrust at a young Felon boat-builder, but too late. The kragen flung out a palp, seized the youth around the neck. Sklar Hast cursed, heaved, tore; the clenched palp was unyielding. Another curled out for his leg; Sklar

Hast kicked, danced back, still heaving upon the Felon's writhing form. The kragen drew the Felon slowly forward, hoping, so Sklar Hast realized, to pull him within easier reach. He loosened his grip, but the kragen allowed its palp to sway back to encourage Sklar Hast, who once more tore at the constricting palp. Again the kragen craftily drew its captive and Sklar Hast forward; the second palp snapped out once more and this time coiled around Sklar Hast's leg. Sklar Hast dropped to the ground, twisted himself around and broke the hold, though losing skin. The kragen petulantly jerked the Felon to within reach of its mandible, neatly snipped off the young man's head, tossed body and head aside. A horrified gasp came from the watching crowd. Ixon Myrex bellowed, "Sklar Hast, a man's life is gone, due to your savage obstinacy! You have much to answer for! Woe to you!"

Sklar Hast ignored the imprecation. He ran to his hut, found chisels and a mallet with a head of dense sea-plant stem, brought up from a depth of two hundred feet.[*] The chisels had blades of pelvic bone ground sharp against a board gritted with the silica husks of foraminifera. Sklar Hast returned to the kragen, put the chisel against the pale lamellum between the chitin dome and the foliations of the turret. He tapped; the chisel penetrated; this, the substance of a new layer being added to the turret, was relatively soft, the consistency of cooked gristle. Sklar Hast struck again; the chisel cut deep. The kragen squirmed.

Sklar Hast worked the chisel back out, made a new incision beside the first, then another and another, working around the periphery of the chitin dome, which was approximately two feet in diameter. The kragen squirmed and shuddered, whether in pain or apprehension it alone knew. As Sklar Hast worked around to the front, the palps groped back for him, but he shielded himself behind the turret, and finally gouged out the lamellum completely around the circumference of the turret.

His followers watched in awe and silence; from the main float came somber mutters, and occasional whimpers of superstitious dread from the children.

The channel was cut; Sklar handed chisel and mallet back to Elmar Pronave. He mounted the body of the kragen, bent his knees, hooked fingers under the edge of the chitin dome, heaved. The dome ripped up and off, almost unbalancing Sklar Hast. The dome rolled down to the pad, the turret stood like an open-topped cylinder; within were coils and loops of something like dirty gray string. There were knots here, nodes there, on each side a pair of kinks, to the front a great tangle of kinks and loops.

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[*] The Advertiserman takes below a pulley which he attaches to a sea-plant stalk. By means of ropes, buckets of air are pulled down, allowing him to remain under water as long as he chooses. Using two such systems,, alternately lowered, the diver can descend to a depth of two hundred feet, where the sea-plant stalks grow dense and rigid.

Sklar Hast looked down in interest. He was joined by Elmar Pronave. "The creature's brain, evidently," said Sklar Hast. "Here the ganglions terminate. Or perhaps they are merely the termini of muscles."

Elmar Pronave took the mallet and with the handle prodded at a node. The kragen gave a furious jerk. "Well, well," said Pronave. "Interesting indeed." He prodded further: here, there. Every time he touched the exposed ganglions the kragen jerked. Sklar Hast suddenly put out his hand to halt him. "Notice. On the right, those two long loops; likewise on the left. When you touched this one here, the fore-vane jerked." He took the mallet, prodded each of the loops in turn; and in turn each of the vanes jerked.

"Aha!" declared Elmar Pronave. "Should we persist, we could teach the kragen to jig."

"Best we should kill the beast," said Sklar Hast. "Day is approaching and who knows but what…" From the float sounded a sudden low wail, quickly cut off as by the constriction of breath. The group around the kragen stirred; someone vented a deep sound of dismay. Sklar Hast jumped up on the kragen, looked around. The population on the float were staring to sea; he looked likewise, to see King Kragen. He floated under the surface, only his turret above water. The eyes stared forward, each a foot across: lenses of tough crystal behind which flickered milky films and pale blue sheen. King Kragen had either drifted close down the trail of Phocan's Cauldron on the water, or approached sub-surface.

Fifty feet from the lagoon nets he let his bulk come to the surface: first the whole of his turret, then the black cylinder housing the maw and the digestive process, finally the great flat sub-body: this, five feet thick, thirty feet wide, sixty feet long. To the sides protruded the propulsive vanes, thick as the girth of three men. Viewed from dead ahead King Kragen appeared a deformed ogre swimming the breast stroke. His forward eyes, in their horn tubes, were turned toward the float of Sklar Hast, and seemed fixed upon the hulk of the mutilated kragen. The men stared back, muscles stiff as sea-plant stalk. The kragen which they had captured, once so huge and formidable, now seemed a miniature, a doll, a toy. Through its after-eyes it saw King Kragen, and gave a fluting whistle, a sound completely lost and desolate.

Sklar Hast suddenly found his tongue. He spoke in a husky urgent tone. "Back. To the back of the pad. Swim to the float."

From the main float rose the voice of Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor. In quavering tones he called out across the water: "Behold, King Kragen, the men of Tranque Float! Now we denounce the presumptuous bravado of these few heretics! Behold, this pleasant lagoon, with its succulent sponges, devoted to the well-being of the magnanimous King Kragen—" the reedy voice faltered as King Kragen twitched his great vanes and eased forward. The great eyes stared without discernible expression, but behind there seemed to be a leaping and shifting of pale pink and pale blue lights. The folk on the float drew back as King Kragen breasted close to the net. With a twitch of his vanes, he ripped the net; two more twitches shredded it. From the folk on the float came a moan of dread; King Kragen had not been mollified.

King Kragen eased into the lagoon, approached Sklar Hast's pad, which now was deserted except for the helpless kragen. The bound beast thrashed feebly, sounded its fluting whistle. King Kragen reached forth a palp, seized it, lifted it into the air, where it dangled helplessly. King Kragen drew it contemptuously close to his great mandibles, chopped it quickly into slices of gray and black gristle. These he tossed away, out into the ocean. He paused to drift a moment, to consider. Then he surged on Sklar Hast's pad. One blow of his fore-vane demolished the hut, another cut a great gouge in the pad. The after-vanes thrashed among the arbors; water, debris, broken sponges boiled up from below. King Kragen thrust again, wallowed completely up on the pad, which slowly crumpled and sank beneath his weight.

King Kragen pulled himself back into the lagoon, cruised back and forth destroying arbors, shredding the net, smashing huts of all the pads of the lagoon. Then he turned his attention to the main float, breasting up to the edge. For a moment he eyed the population, which started to set up a terrified keening sound, then thrust himself forward, wallowed up on the float, and the keening became a series of hoarse cries and screams. The folk ran back and forth with jerky scurrying steps.

King Kragen bulked on the float like a toad on a lily-pad. He struck with his vanes; the float split. The hoodwink tower, the great structure so cunningly woven, so carefully contrived, tottered. King Kragen lunged again, the tower toppled, falling into the huts along the north edge of the float.

King Kragen floundered across the float. He destroyed the granary, and bushels of yellow meal laboriously scraped from seaplant pistils streamed into the water. He crushed the racks where stalk, withe and fiber were stretched and flexed; he dealt likewise with the rope-walk. Then, as if suddenly in a hurry, he swung about, heaved himself to the southern edge of the float. A number of huts and thirty-two of the folk, mostly aged and very young, were crushed or thrust into the water and drowned.

King Kragen regained the open sea. He floated quietly a moment or two, palps twitching in the expression of some unknowable emotion. Then he moved his vanes and slid off across the calm ocean.

Tranque Float was a devastation, a tangle, a scene of wrath and grief. The lagoon had returned to the ocean, with the arbors reduced to rubbish and the shoals of food-fish scattered. Many huts had been crushed. The hoodwink tower lay toppled. Of a population of four hundred and eighty, forty-three were dead, with as many more injured. The survivors stood blank-eyed and limp, unable to comprehend the full extent of the disaster which had come upon them.

Presently they roused themselves, and gathered at the far western edge where the damage had been the least. Ixon Myrex sought through the faces, eventually spied Sklar Hast sitting on a fragment of the fallen hoodwink tower. He raised his hand slowly, pointed. "Sklar Hast! I denounce you. The evil you have done to Tranque Float cannot be uttered in words. Your arrogance, your callous indifference to our pleas, your cruel and audacious villainy—how can you hope to expiate them?"

Sklar Hast looked off across the sea.

"In my capacity as Arbiter of Tranque Float, I now declare you to be a criminal of the basest sort, together with all those who served you as accomplices, and most noteworthy Elmar Pronave! Elmar Pronave, show your shameful face! Where do you hide?"

But Elmar Pronave had been drowned and did not answer.

Chaezy Zander limped across the area to stand beside Ixon Myrex. "I likewise denounce Sklar Hast and declare him Assistant Master Hoodwink no longer. He has disgraced his caste and his calling: I hereby eject him from the fellowship of both!"

Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor rose to speak. "Denunciations are not enough. King Kragen, in wreaking his terrible but just vengeance, intended that the primes of the deed should die. I now declare the will of King Kragen to be death, by either strangulation or bludgeoning, of Sklar Hast and all his accomplices."

"Not so fast," said Sklar Hast at last. "It appears to me that a certain confusion is upon us. Two kragen, a large one and a small one, have injured us. I, Sklar Hast, and my friends, are those who hoped to protect the float from depredation. We failed. We are not criminals; we are simply not as strong nor as wicked as King Kragen."

"You are aware," Semon Voidenvo persisted, "that King Kragen reserves to himself the duty of guarding us from the lesser kragen? You are aware that in assaulting the kragen, you in effect assaulted King Kragen?"

Sklar Hast considered. "We will need more powerful tools than ropes and chisels to kill King Kragen."

Semon Voidenvo turned away speechless. The people looked apathetically toward Sklar Hast. Few seemed to share the indignation of the elders.

Ixon Myrex sensed the general feeling of misery and fatigue. "This is no time for recrimination. There is work to be done, vast work; all our structures to be rebuilt, our tower rendered operative, our net rewoven. But Sklar Hast's crime must not go without appropriate punishment. I therefore propose a Grand Convocation to take place one week from today, on Apprise Float. The fate of Sklar Hast and his gang will be inexorably decided by a Council of Elders."

CHAPTER II

The ocean had never been plumbed. At two hundred feet, the maximum depth attempted by stalk-cutters and pod-gatherers, the sea-plant stems were still a tangle. One Waller Murven, a man half-daredevil, half-maniac, had descended to three hundred feet, and in the indigo gloom noted the stalks merging to disappear into the murk as a single great trunk. But attempts to sound the bottom, by means of a line weighted with a bag of bone chippings, were unsuccessful. How then had the sea-plants managed to anchor themselves? Some supposed that the plants were of great antiquity, and had developed during a time when the water was much lower. Others conjectured a sinking of the ocean bottom; still others were content to ascribe the feat to an innate tendency of the sea-plants.

Of all the floats Apprise was the largest and one of the first to be settled. The central agglomeration was perhaps seven acres in extent; the lagoon was bounded by thirty or forty smaller pads. Apprise Float was the traditional site of the convocations, which occurred at approximately yearly intervals and which were attended by the active and responsible adults of the system. Drama and excitement attended the holding of the convocations. The folk of the floats seldom ventured far from home, since it was widely believed that King Kragen disapproved of travel. He ignored the coracles of swindlers, and also the rafts of withe or stalk which occasionally passed back and forth between the floats; but on various occasions he had demolished boats or coracles which seemed to have no ostensible business or purpose. Coracles conveying folk to a convocation had never been molested, however, even though King Kragen always seemed aware that a convocation was in progress, and often watched proceedings from a distance of a half-mile or so. How King Kragen gained his knowledge was a matter of great mystery: some asserted that on every float lived a man who was a man in semblance only: who inwardly was a manifestation of King Kragen. It was through this man, according to the superstition, that King Kragen knew what transpired on the floats.

For three days preceding the convocation there was incessant flickering along the line of the hoodwink towers; the destruction of Tranque Float was reported in full detail, together with Ixon Myrex's denunciation of Sklar Hast and Sklar Hast's rebuttal. On each of the floats there was intense discussion and a certain degree of debate. But since, in most cases, the Arbiter and the Intercessor of each float inveighed against Sklar Hast, there was little organized sentiment in his favor.

On the morning of the convocation, early, before the morning sky showed blue, coracles full of folk moved between the floats. The survivors of the Tranque Float disaster, who for the most part had sought refuge on Thrasneck and Bickle, were among the first underway, as were the folk from Almack and Sciona, to the far west.

All morning the coracles shuttled back and forth between the floats; shortly before noon the first groups began to arrive on Apprise. Each group wore the distinctive emblems of its float; and those who felt caste distinction important likewise wore the traditional hair-stylings, forehead plaques and dorsal ribbons; otherwise all dressed in much the same fashion: shirts and pantlets of coarse linen woven from sea-plant fiber; sandals of rugfish leather, ceremonial gauntlets and epaulets of sequins cut from the kernels of a certain half-animal, half-vegetable mollusc.

As the folk arrived they trooped to the famous old Apprise Inn, where they refreshed themselves at a table on which was set forth a collation of beer, pod-cakes and pickled fingerlings; after which the newcomers separated to various quarters of the float, in accordance with traditional caste distinctions.

In the center of the float was a rostrum and on benches surrounding the notables took their places: craft-masters, caste-chiefs, Arbiters and Intercessors. The rostrum was at all times open to any who wished to speak, so long as they gained the sponsorship of one of the notables. The first speakers at the convocations customarily were elders intent on exhorting the younger folk to excellence and virtue; so it was today. An hour after the sun had reached the zenith the first speaker made his way to the rostrum; a portly old Incendiary from Maudelinda Float who had in just such a fashion opened the speaking at the last five convocations. He sought and was perfunctorily granted sponsorship—by now his speeches were regarded as a necessary evil; he mounted the rostrum and began to speak. His voice was rich, throbbing, voluminous; his periods were long, his sentiments well-used, his illuminations unremarkable:

"We meet again; I am pleased to see so many of the faces which over the years have become familiar and well-beloved; and alas there are certain faces no more to be seen, those who have slipped away to the Bourne, many untimely, as those who suffered punishment only these few days past before the wrath of King Kragen, of which we all stand in awe. A dreadful circumstance thus to provoke the majesty of this Elemental Reality; it should never have occurred; it would never have occurred if all abided by the ancient disciplines. Why must we scorn the wisdom of our ancestors? Those noble and most heroic of men who dared to revolt against the tyranny of the mindless helots, seize the Ship of Space which was taking them to brutal confinement, and seek a haven here on this blessed world! Our ancestors knew the benefits of order and rigor: they designated the castes and set them to tasks for which they presumably had received training on the Homeworld. In such a fashion the Swindlers were assigned the task of swindling fish; the Hoodwinks were set to winking hoods; the Incendiaries, among whom I am proud to number myself, wove ropes; while the Bezzler gave us the Intercessors who have procured the favor and benevolent guardianship of King Kragen.

"Like begets like; characteristics persist and distill: why then are the castes crumbling and giving way to helter-skelter disorder? I appeal to the youth of today: read the old books: the Dicta. Study the artifacts in the Museum, renew your dedication to the system formulated by our forefathers: you have no heritage more precious than your caste identity!"

The old Incendiary spoke on in such a vein for several minutes further, and was succeeded by another old man, a former Hoodwink of good reputation, who worked until films upon his eyes gave one configuration much the look of another. Like the old Incendiary he too urged a more fervent dedication to the old-time values. "I deplore the sloth and pudicity of today's youth! We are becoming a race of sluggards! It is sheer good fortune that King Kragen protects us from the gluttony of the lesser kragen. And what if the tyrants of out-space discovered our haven and sought once more to enslave us? How would we defend ourselves? By hurling fish-heads? By diving under the floats in the hope that our adversaries would follow and drown themselves? I propose that each float form a militia, well-trained and equipped with darts and spears, fashioned from the most durable stalk obtainable!"

The old Hoodwink was followed by the Sumber Float Intercessor, who courteously suggested that should the out-space tyrants appear, King Kragen would be sure to visit upon them the most poignant punishments, the most absolute of rebuffs, so that the tyrants would flee in terror never to return. "King Kragen is mighty, King Kragen is wise and benevolent, unless his dignity is impugned, as in the detestable incident at Tranque Float, where the willfulness of a bigoted free-thinker caused agony to many." Now he modestly turned down his head. "It is neither my place nor my privilege to propose a punishment suitable to so heinous an offense as the one under discussion. But I would go beyond this particular crime to dwell upon the underlying causes: namely the bravado of certain folk, who ordain themselves equal or superior to the accepted ways of life which have served us so well so long…"

Presently he descended to the float. His place was taken by a somber man of stalwart physique, wearing the plainest of garments. "My name is Sklar Hast," he said. "I am that so-called 'bigoted free-thinker' just referred to. I have much to say, but I hardly know how to say it. I will be blunt. King Kragen is not the wise beneficent guardian the Intercessors like to pretend. King Kragen is a gluttonous beast who every year becomes more enormous and more gluttonous. I sought to kill a lesser kragen which I found destroying my arbors; by some means King Kragen learned of this attempt and reacted with insane malice."

"Hist! Hist!" cried the Intercessors from below. "Shame! Outrage!"

"Why does King Kragen resent my effort? After all, he kills any lesser kragen he discovers in the vicinity. It is simple and self-evident. King Kragen does not want men to think about killing kragen for fear they will attempt to kill him. I propose that this is what we do. Let us put aside this ignoble servility, this groveling to a sea-beast, let us turn our best efforts to the destruction of King Kragen."

"Irresponsible maniac!" "Fool!" "Vile-minded ingrate!" called the Intercessors in wrath.

Sklar Hast waited, but the invective increased in volume. Finally Phyral Berwick the Apprise Arbiter mounted the rostrum and held up his hands. "Quiet! Let Sklar Hast speak! He stands on the rostrum; it is his privilege to say what he wishes."

"Must we listen to garbage and filth?" called Semon Voidenvo. "This man has destroyed Tranque Float; now he urges his frantic lunacy upon the rest of us."

"Let him urge," declared Phyral Berwick. "You are under no obligation to comply."

Sklar Hast said, "The Intercessors naturally resist these ideas; they are bound closely to King Kragen, and claim to have some means of communicating with him. Possibly this is so. Why else should King Kragen arrive so opportunely at Tranque Float? Now here is a very cogent point: if we can agree to liberate ourselves from King Kragen, we must prevent the Intercessors from making known our plans to him, otherwise we shall suffer more than necessary. Most of you know in your hearts that I speak truth. King Kragen is a crafty beast with an insatiable appetite and we are his slaves. You know this truth but you fear to acknowledge it. Those who spoke before me have mentioned our forefathers: the men who captured a ship from the tyrants who sought to immure them on a penal planet.

What would our forefathers have done? Would they have submitted to this gluttonous ogre? Of course not.

"How can we kill King Kragen? The plans must wait upon agreement, upon the concerted will to act, and in any event must not be told before the Intercessors. If there are any here who believe as I do, now is the time for them to make themselves heard."

He stepped down from the rostrum. Across the float was silence. Men's faces were frozen. Sklar Hast looked to right and to left. No one met his eye.

Semon Voidenvo mounted the rostrum. "You have listened to the shameless murderer. On Tranque Float we condemned him to death for his malevolent acts. According to custom he demanded the right to speak before a convocation; now he has done so. Has he confessed his great crime; has he wept for the evil he has visited upon Tranque Float? No; he gibbers his plans for further enormities; he outrages decency by mentioning our ancestors in the same breath with his foul proposals. Let the convocation endorse the verdict of Tranque Float; let all those who respect King Kragen and benefit from his ceaseless vigilance, raise now their hands in the clenched fist of death!"

"Death!" roared the Intercessors and raised their fists. But elsewhere through the crowd there was hesitation and uneasiness. Eyes shifted backwards and forwards; there were furtive glances out to sea. Semen Voidenvo once more called for a signal, and now a few fists were raised.

Phyral Berwick, the Apprise Monitor, rose to his feet. "I remind Semon Voidenvo that he has now called twice for the death of Sklar Hast. If he calls once more and fails to achieve an affirmative vote, Sklar Hast is vindicated."

Semen Voidenvo's face sagged. He looked uncertainly over the crowd, and without further statement descended.

The rostrum was empty. No one sought to speak. Finally Phyral Berwick himself mounted the steps. He was a stocky square-faced man with gray hair, ice-blue eyes, a short gray beard. He spoke slowly. "You have heard Sklar Hast, who calls for the death of King Kragen. You have heard Semon Voidenvo, who calls for the death of Sklar Hast. I will tell you my feelings. I have great fear in the first case and great disinclination in the second. I have no clear sense of what I should do."

From the audience a man called "Question!" Phyral Berwick nodded. "State your name, caste and craft, and propound your question."

"I am Meth Cagno; I am by blood a Larcener, although I no longer follow caste custom; my craft is that of Scrivener. My question has this background: Sklar Hast has voiced a conjecture which I think deserves an answer: namely, that Semen Voidenvo, the Tranque Intercessor, called King

Kragen to Tranque Float. This is a subtle question, because much depends upon not only *if* Semon Voidenvo issued the call, but precisely *when*. If he did so when the rogue kragen was first discovered, well and good. But—if he called after Sklar Hast made his attempt to kill the rogue, Semon Voidenvo is more guilty of the Tranque disaster than Sklar Hast. My question then: what is the true state of affairs? Do the Intercessors secretly communicate with King Kragen? Specifically, did Semon Voidenvo call King Kragen to Tranque Float in order that Sklar Hast should be punished?"

Phyral Berwick deliberated. "I cannot answer your question. But I think it deserves an answer. Semon Voidenvo, what do you say?"

"I say nothing."

"Come," said Phyral Berwick reasonably. "Your craft is Intercessor; your responsibility is to the men whom you represent, not to King Kragen, no matter how fervent your respect. Any evasion or secrecy can only arouse our misgivings."

"It is to be understood," said Semen Voidenvo tartly, "that if I did indeed summon King Kragen, my motives were of the highest order."

"Well, then, did you do so?"

Semon Voidenvo cast about for a means to escape from his dilemma, and found none. Finally he said, "There is a means by which the Intercessors are able to summon King Kragen in the event that a rogue kragen appears. This occurred; I so summoned King Kragen."

"Indeed." Phyral Berwick drummed his fingers on the rail of the rostrum. "Are these the only occasions that you summon King Kragen?"

"Why do you question me!" demanded Semen Voidenvo. "I am Intercessor; the criminal is Sklar Hast."

"Easy, then; the questions illuminate the extent of the alleged crime. For instance, let me ask this: do you ever summon King Kragen to feed from your lagoon in order to visit a punishment upon the folk of your float?"

Semon Voidenvo blinked. "The wisdom of King Kragen is inordinate. He can detect delinquencies, he makes his presence known—"

"Specifically then, you summoned King Kragen to Tranque Float when Sklar Hast sought to kill the lesser kragen?"

"My acts are not in the balance. I see no reason to answer the question."

Phyral Berwick spoke to the crowd in a troubled voice. "There seems no way to determine exactly when Semon Voidenvo called King Kragen. If he did so after Sklar Hast had begun his attack upon the rogue, then in my opinion, Semen Voidenvo the Intercessor is more immediately responsible for the Tranque disaster than Sklar Hast. Thereupon it becomes a travesty to visit any sort of penalty upon Sklar Hast. Unfortunately there seems no way of settling this question."

The Apprise Intercessor, Barquan Blasdel, rose slowly to his feet. "Arbiter Berwick, I fear that you are seriously confused. Sklar Hast and his gang committed an act knowingly proscribed both by the Tranque Monitor Ixon Myrex and by the Tranque Intercessor Semon Voidenvo. The consequences stemmed from this act; hence Sklar Hast is guilty."

"Barquan Blasdel," said Phyral Berwick, "you are Apprise Intercessor. Have you ever summoned King Kragen to Apprise Float?"

"As Semon Voidenvo pointed out, Sklar Hast is the criminal at the bar, not the conscientious Intercessors of the various floats. By no means may Sklar Hast be allowed to evade his punishment. King Kragen is not lightly to be defied. Even though the convocation will not raise their collective fist to smite Sklar Hast, I say that he must die."

Phyral Berwick fixed his pale blue eyes upon Barquan Blasdel. "If the convocation gives Sklar Hast his life, he will not die unless I die before him."

Meth Cagno came forward. "And I likewise."

The men of Tranque Float who had joined Sklar Hast in the killing of the rogue kragen came toward the rostrum, shouting their intention of joining Sklar Hast either in life or death, and with them came others, from various floats.

Barquan Blasdel climbed onto the rostrum, held his hands wide. "Before others declare themselves—look out to sea. King Kragen watches, attentive to learn who is loyal and who is faithless."

The crowd swung about as if one individual. A hundred yards off the float the water swirled lazily around King Kragen's great turret. The crystal eyes pointed like telescopes toward Apprise Float. Presently the turret sank beneath the surface. The blue water roiled, then flowed smooth and featureless.

Sklar Hast went to the ladder, started to mount to the rostrum. Barquan Blasdel the Intercessor halted him. "The rostrum not must become a shouting-place. Stay till you are summoned!" But Sklar Hast pushed him aside, went to face the crowd. He pointed toward the smooth ocean. "There you have seen the vile beast, our enemy! Why should we deceive ourselves? Intercessors, Arbiters, all of us—let us forget our differences, let us join our crafts and our resources! If we do so, we can evolve a method to kill King Kragen! So now—decide!"

Barquan Blasdel threw back his head aghast. He took a step toward Sklar Hast, as if to seize him, then turned to the audience. "You have heard this madman—twice you have heard him. You have also observed the vigilance of King Kragen whose force is known to all. You can choose therefore either to obey the exhortations of a twitching lunatic, or be guided by your ancient trust in the benevolence of mighty King Kragen. In one manner only does Sklar Hast speak truth: there must be a definite resolution to this matter. We can have no half-measures! Sklar Hast must die! So now hold high your fists—each and all! Silence the frantic screamings of Sklar Hast! King Kragen is near at hand! Death to Sklar Hast!" He thrust his fist high into the air.

The Intercessors followed suit. "Death to Sklar Hast!"

Hesitantly, indecisively, other fists raised, then others and others. Some changed their minds and drew down their fists; others submitted to arguments and either drew down their fists or thrust them high; some raised their fists only to have others pull them down. Altercations sprang up across the float; the hoarse sound of contention began to make itself heard. Barquan Blasdel leaned forward in sudden concern, calling for calm. Sklar Hast likewise started to speak, but he desisted—because suddenly words were of no avail. In a bewildering, almost magical, shift the placid convocation had become a melée. Men and women tore savagely at each other, screaming, cursing, raging, squealing. Emotion accumulated from childhood, stored and constrained, had suddenly exploded; and the identical fear and hate had prompted opposite reactions. Across the float the tide of battle surged, out into the water where staid Bezzlers and responsible Larceners sought to drown each other. Few weapons were available: clubs of stalk, a bone axe or two, a half-dozen stakes, as many knives. While the struggle was at its most intense King Kragen once more surfaced, this time a quarter-mile to the north, from whence he turned his vast incurious gaze upon the float.

The fighting slowed and dwindled, from sheer exhaustion. The combatants drew apart into panting bleeding groups. In the lagoon floated half-a-dozen corpses; on the float lay as many more. Now for the first time it could be seen that those who stood by Sklar Hast were considerably outnumbered, by almost two to one, and also that this group included for the most part the most vigorous and able of the craftsmen, though few of the Masters: about half of the Hoodwinks, two-thirds of the Scriveners, relatively few from the Jacklegs, Advertisermen, Nigglers and other low castes, fewer still of the Arbiters and no Intercessors whatever.

Barquan Blasdel, still on the rostrum, cried out, "This is a sorry day indeed; a sorry day! Sklar Hast, see the anguish you have brought to the floats! There can be no mercy for you now!"

Sklar Hast came forward, pale and flaming-eyed. Blood coursed down his face from the slash of a knife. Ignoring Blasdel he mounted the rostrum, and addressed the two groups:

"As Blasdel the Intercessor has said, there is no turning back now. So be it. Let those who want to serve King Kragen remain. Let those who want free lives go forth across the sea. There are floats to north and south, to east and west, floats as kind and hospitable as these, where we will soon have homes as rich and modern—perhaps more so."

Barquan Blasdel strode forward. "Go then! All you faithless, you irreverent ones—get hence and good riddance! Go where you will, and never seek to return when the teeming kragen, unchided by the great King, devour your sponges, tear your nets, crush your coracles!"

"The many cannot be as rapacious as the one," said Sklar Hast. "You who will go then, return to your floats, load tools and cordage, all your utile goods into your coracles. In two days we depart. Our destination and other details must remain secret. I need not explain why." He cast an ironic look toward Barquan Blasdel.

"You need not fear our interference," said Blasdel. "You may depart at will; indeed we will facilitate your going."

"On the morning of the third day hence, then, when the wind blows fair, we depart."

CHAPTER III

Barquan Blasdel, the Apprise Intercessor, his spouse and six daughters occupied a pad to the north of the main float, somewhat isolated and apart. It was perhaps the choicest and most pleasant pad of the Apprise complex, situated where Blasdel could read the hoodwink towers of Apprise, of Quatrefoil and the Bandings to the east, of Granolt to the west. The pad was delightfully overgrown with a hundred different plants and vines: some yielding resinous pods, others capsules of fragrant sap, others crisp tendrils and shoots. Certain shrubs produced stains and pigment; a purple-leaved epiphyte yielded a rich-flavored pith. Other growths were entirely ornamental—a situation not too usual along the floats, where space was at a premium and every growing object weighed for its utility. Along the entire line of floats few pads could compare to that of Barquan Blasdel for beauty, variety of plantings, isolation and calm.

In late afternoon of the second day after the turbulent convocation, Barquan Blasdel returned to his pad. He dropped the painter of his coracle over a stake of carved bone, gazed appreciatively into the west. The sun had only just departed the sky, which now glowed with effulgent greens, blues, and, at the zenith, a purple of exquisite purity. The ocean, shuddering to the first whispers of the evening breeze, reflected the sky. Blasdel felt surrounded, immersed in color… He turned away, marched to his house, whistling a complacent tune between his teeth. On the morrow the most troublesome elements of all the floats would depart on the morning breeze, and no more would be heard from them ever. And Blasdel's whistling became slow and thoughtful. Although life flowed smoothly and without contention, over the years a certain uneasiness and dissatisfaction had begun to make itself felt. Dissident elements had begun to question the established order. The sudden outbreak of violence at the convocation perhaps had been inevitable: an explosion of suppressed or even unconscious tensions. But all was working out for the best. The affair could not have resolved itself more smoothly if he had personally arranged the entire sequence of events. At one stroke all the skeptics, grumblers, ne'er-do-wells, the covertly insolent, the obstinate hard-heads—at one stroke, all would disappear, never again to trouble the easy and orthodox way of life.

Almost jauntily Barquan Blasdel ambled up the path to his residence: a group of five semi-detached huts, screened by the garden from the main float, and so providing a maximum of privacy for Blasdel, his spouse and his six daughters. Blasdel halted. On a bench beside the door sat a man. Twilight murk concealed his face. Blasdel frowned, peered. Intruders upon his private pad were not welcome. Blasdel marched forward. The man rose from the bench and bowed: it was Phyral Berwick, the Apprise Arbiter. "Good evening," said Berwick. "I trust I did not startle you."

"By no means," said Blasdel shortly. With rank equal to his own Berwick could not be ignored, although after his unconventional actions at the convocation Blasdel could not bring himself to display more than a minimum of formal courtesy. He said, "Unfortunately I was not expecting callers and can offer you no refreshment."

"A circumstance of no moment," declared Berwick. "I desire neither food nor drink." He waved his hand around the pad. "You live on a pad of surpassing beauty, Barquan Blasdel. There are many who might envy you."

Blasdel shrugged. "Since my conduct is orthodox, I am armored against adverse opinion. But what urgency brings you here? I fear that I must be less than ceremonious; I am shortly due at the hoodwink tower to participate in a coded all-float conference."

Berwick made a gesture of polite acquiescence. "My business is of small moment. But I would not keep you standing out here in the dusk. Shall we enter?"

Blasdel grunted, opened the door, allowed Berwick to enter. From a cupboard he brought luminant fiber, which he set aglow and arranged in a holder. Turning a quick side-glance toward Berwick he said, "In all candor I am somewhat surprised to see you. Apparently you were among the most vehement of those dissidents who planned to depart."

"I may well have given that impression," Berwick agreed. "But you must realize that declarations uttered in the heat of emotion are occasionally amended in the light of sober reason."

Blasdel nodded curtly. "True enough. I suspect that many of the ingrates will think twice before joining this hare-brained expedition."

"This is partly the reason for my presence here," said Berwick. He looked around the room. "An interesting chamber. You own dozens of valuable artifacts. But where are the others of your family?"

"In the domestic area. This is my sanctum, my workroom, my place of meditation."

"Indeed." Berwick inspected the walls. "Indeed, indeed! I believe I notice certain relicts of the Forefathers!"

"True," said Blasdel. "This small flat object is of the substance called 'metal,' and is extremely hard. The best bone knife will not scratch it. The purpose of this particular object I cannot conjecture. It is an heirloom. These books are exact copies of the Dicta in the Hall of Archives, and present the memoirs of the Forefathers. Alas! I find them beyond my comprehension. There is nothing more of any great interest. On the shelf—my ceremonial head-dresses; you have seen them before. Here is my telescope. It is old; the case is warped, the gum of the lenses has bulged and cracked. It was poor gum, to begin with. But I have little need for a better instrument. My possessions are few. Unlike many Intercessors and certain Arbiters," here he cast a meaningful eye at Phyral Berwick, "I do not choose to surround myself with sybaritical cushions and baskets of sweetmeats."

Berwick laughed ruefully. "You have touched upon my weaknesses. Perhaps the fear of deprivation has occasioned second-thoughts in me."

"Ha hah!" Blasdel became jovial. "I begin to understand. The scalawags who set off to wild new floats can expect nothing but hardship: wild fish, horny sponges, new varnish with little more body than water; in short they will be returning to the life of savages. They must expect to suffer the depredations of lesser kragen, who will swiftly gather. Perhaps in time…" His voice dwindled, his face took on a thoughtful look.

"What was it you were about to say?" prompted Phyral Berwick.

Blasdel gave a non-committal laugh. "An amusing, if far-fetched, conceit crossed my mind. Perhaps in time one of these lesser kragen will vanquish the others, and drive them away. When this occurs, those who flee King Kragen will have a king of their own, who may eventually…" Again his voice paused.

"Who may eventually rival King Kragen in size and force?" Berwick supplied. "The concept is not unreasonable—although King Kragen is already enormous from long feasting, and shows no signs of halting his growth." An almost imperceptible tremor moved the floor of the hut. Blasdel went to look out the door. "I thought I felt the arrival of a coracle."

"Conceivably a gust of wind," said Berwick. "Well, to my errand. As you have guessed I did not come to examine your relicts or comment upon the comfort of your cottage. My business is this. I feel a certain sympathy for those who are leaving, and I feel that no one, not even the most violently fanatic Intercessor, would wish this group to meet King Kragen upon the ocean. King Kragen, as you are aware, disapproves of exploration, and becomes petulant, even wrathful, when he finds men venturing out upon the ocean. Perhaps he fears the possibility of the second King Kragen concerning which we speculated. Hence I came to inquire the whereabouts of King Kragen. In the morning the wind blows east, and the optimum location for King Kragen would be to the far west at Tranque or Thrasneck."

Blasdel nodded sagely. "The emigrants are putting their luck to the test. Should King Kragen chance to be waiting in the east tomorrow morning, and should he spy the flotilla, his wrath might well be excited, to the detriment of the expedition."

"And where," inquired Berwick, "was King Kragen at last notification?"

Barquan Blasdel knit his brows. "I believe I noted a hoodwink message to the effect that he was seen cruising in a westerly direction to the south of Maudelinda Float, toward Bickle. I might well have misread the flicker, I only noted the configuration from the corner of my eye—but such was my understanding."

"Excellent," declared Berwick. "This is good news. The emigrants should make their departure safely and without interference."

"So we hope," said Blasdel. "King Kragen of course is subject to unpredictable whims and quirks."

Berwick made a confidential sign. "Sometimes—so it is rumored—he responds to signals transmitted in some mysterious manner by the Intercessors. Tell me, Barquan Blasdel, is this the case? We are both notables and together share responsibility for the welfare of Apprise Float. Is it true then that the Intercessors communicate with King Kragen, as has been alleged?"

"Now then, Arbiter Berwick," said Blasdel, "this is hardly a pertinent question. Should I answer yes, then I would be divulging a craft secret. Should I answer no, then it would seem that we Intercessors boast of nonexistent capabilities. So you must satisfy yourself with those hypotheses which seem the most profitable."

"Fairly answered," said Phyral Berwick. "However—and in the strictest confidence—I will report to you an amusing circumstance. As you know, at the convocation I declared myself for the party of Sklar Hast. Subsequently I was accepted into their most intimate counsels. I can inform you with authority—but first, you will assure me of your silence? As under no circumstances would I betray Sklar Hast or compromise the expedition."

"Certainly, indeed; my lips are sealed as with fourteen-year-old varnish."

"Well then, I accept you at your word. This is Sklar Hast's amusing tactic: he has arranged that a group of influential Intercessors shall accompany the group. If all goes well, the Intercessors live. If not, like all the rest, they are crushed in the mandibles of King Kragen." And Phyral Berwick, standing back, watched Barquan Blasdel with an attentive gaze. "What do you make of that?"

Blasdel stood rigid, fingering his fringe of black beard. He darted a quick glance toward Berwick. "Which Intercessors are to be kidnaped?"

"Aha," said Berwick. "That, like the response of the question I put to you, is in the nature of a craft secret. I doubt if lesser men will be troubled, but if I were Intercessor for Aumerge, or Sumber, or Quatrefoil, or even Apprise, I believe that I might have cause for caution."

Blasdel stared at Berwick with mingled suspicion and uneasiness. "Do you take this means to warn me? If so, I would thank you to speak less ambiguously. Personally I fear no such attack. Within a hundred feet are three stalwarts, testing my daughters for marriage. A loud call would bring instant help from the float, which is scarcely a stone's throw beyond the garden."

Berwick nodded sagely. "It seems then that you are utterly secure."

"Still, I must hurry to the float," said Blasdel, "I am expected at a conference, and the evening grows no younger."

Berwick bowed and stood aside. "You will naturally remember to reveal nothing of what I told you, to vouchsafe no oblique warning, to hint nothing of the matter—in fact to make no reference to it whatever."

Blasdel considered. "I will say nothing beyond my original intention, to the effect that the villain Sklar Hast obviously knows no moderation, and that it behooves all notables and craft masters to guard themselves against some form of final vengeance."

Berwick paused. "I hardly think you need go quite so far. Perhaps you could phrase it somewhat differently. In this wise: Sklar Hast and his sturdy band take their leave in the morning; now is the last chance for persons so inclined to cast in their lot with the group; however, you hope that all Intercessors will remain at their posts."

"Pah," cried Barquan Blasdel indignantly. "That conveys no sense of imminence. I will say, Sklar Hast is desperate; should he decide to take hostages, his diseased mind would select Intercessors as the most appropriate persons."

Berwick made a firm dissent. "This, I believe, transcends the line I have drawn. My honor is at stake and I can agree to no announcement which baldly states the certainty as a probability. If you choose to make a jocular reference, or perhaps urge that not too many Intercessors join the expedition, then all is well: a subtle germ of suspicion has been planted, you have done your duty and my honor has not been compromised."

"Yes, yes," cried Blasdel, "I agree to anything. But I must hurry to the hoodwink tower. While we quibble Sklar Hast and his bandits are kidnaping Intercessors."

"And what is the harm there?" inquired Berwick mildly. "You state that King Kragen has been observed from Maudelinda Float proceeding to the west; hence the Intercessors are in no danger, and presumably will be allowed to return once Sklar Hast is assured that King Kragen is no longer a danger. Conversely, if the Intercessors have betrayed Sklar Hast and given information to King Kragen so that he waits off Sciona Float, then they deserve to die with the rest. It is justice of the most precise and exquisite balance."

"That is the difficulty," muttered Blasdel, trying to push past Berwick to the door. "I cannot answer for the silence of the other Intercessors. Suppose one among them has notified King Kragen? Then a great tragedy ensues."

"Interesting! So you can indeed summon King Kragen when you so desire?"

"Yes, yes, but, mind you, this is a secret. And now—"

"It follows then that you always know the whereabouts of King Kragen. How do you achieve this?"

"There is no time to explain; suffice it to say that a means is at hand."

"Right here? In your workroom?"

"Yes indeed. Now stand aside. After I have broadcast the warning I will make all clear. Stand aside then!"

Berwick shrugged and allowed Blasdel to run from the cottage, through the garden to the edge of the pad.

Blasdel stopped short at the water's edge. The coracle had disappeared. Where previously Apprise Float had raised its foliage and its great hoodwink tower against the dusk, there was now only blank water and blank sky. The pad floated free; urged by the west wind of evening it already had left Apprise Float behind.

Blasdel gave an inarticulate cry of fury and woe. He turned to find Berwick standing behind him. "What has happened?"

"It seems that while we talked, divers cut through the stem of your pad. At least this is my presumption."

"Yes, yes," grated Blasdel. "So much is obvious. What else?"

Berwick shrugged. "It appears that willy-nilly, whether we like it or not, we are part of the great emigration. Now that such is the case I am relieved to know that you have a means to determine the whereabouts of King Kragen. Come. Let us make use of this device and reassure ourselves."

Blasdel made a guttural sound deep in his throat. He crouched and for a moment appeared on the point of hurling himself at Phyral Berwick. From the shadows of the verdure appeared another man. Berwick pointed. "I believe Sklar Hast himself is at hand."

"You tricked me," groaned Barquan Blasdel between clenched teeth. "You have performed an infamous act, which you shall regret."

"I have done no such deed, although it appears that you may well have misunderstood my position. Still, the time for recrimination is over. We share a similar problem, which is how to escape the malevolence of King Kragen. I suggest that you now proceed to locate him."

Without a word Blasdel turned, proceeded to his cottage. He entered the main room, with Berwick and Sklar Hast close behind. He crossed to the wall, lifted a panel to reveal an inner room. He brought more lights; all entered. A hole had been cut in the floor, and through the pad, the spongy tissue having been painted with a black varnish to prevent its growing together. A tube fashioned from fine yellow stalk perhaps four inches in diameter led down into the water. "At the bottom," said Blasdel curtly, "is a carefully devised horn, of exact shape and quality. The end is four feet in diameter and covered with a diaphragm of seasoned and varnished pad-skin. King Kragen emits a sound to which this horn is sensitive." He went to the tube, put down his ear, listened, slowly turned the tube around a vertical axis. He shook his head. "I hear nothing. This means that King Kragen is at least ten miles distant. If he is closer I can detect him. He passed to the east early today; presumably he swims somewhere near Sumber, or Adelvine."

Sklar Hast laughed quietly. "Urged there by the Intercessors?"

Blasdel shrugged sourly. "As to that I have nothing to say."

"How then do you summon King Kragen?"

Blasdel pointed to a rod rising from the floor, the top of which terminated in a crank. "In the water below is a drum. Inside this drum fits a wheel. When the crank is turned, the wheel, working in resin, rubs against the drum and emits a signal. King Kragen can sense this sound from a great distance—once again about ten miles. When he is needed, at say Bickle Float, the Intercessor at Aumerge calls him, until the horn reveals him to be four or five miles distant, whereupon the Intercessor at Paisley calls him a few miles, then the Maudelinda Intercessor, and so forth until he is within range of the Intercessor at Bickle Float."

Sklar Hast nodded. "I see. In this fashion Semon Voidenvo called King Kragen to Tranque. Whereupon King Kragen destroyed Tranque Float and killed forty-three persons."

"That is the case."

Sklar Hast turned away. Phyral Berwick told Blasdel, "I believe that Semon Voidenvo is one of the Intercessors who are accompanying the emigration. His lot may not be a happy one."

"This is unreasonable," Barquan Blasdel declared heatedly. "He was as faithful to his convictions as Sklar Hast is to his own. After all, Voidenvo did not enjoy the devastation of Tranque Float. It is his home. Many of those killed were his friends. But he gives his faith and trust to King Kragen."

Sklar Hast swung around. "And you?"

Blasdel shook his head. "Not with such wholeheartedness."

Sklar Hast looked toward Berwick. "What should we do with this apparatus? Destroy it? Or preserve it?"

Berwick considered. "We might on some occasion wish to listen for King Kragen. I doubt if we ever will desire to summon him."

Sklar Hast gave a sardonic jerk of the head. "Who knows? To his death perhaps." He turned to Blasdel. "What persons are aboard the pad in addition to us?"

"My spouse—in the cottage two roofs along. Three young daughters who weave ornaments for the Star-cursing Festival. Three older daughters are attempting to prove themselves to three stalwarts who test them for wives. All are unaware that their home floats out on the deep ocean. None wish to become emigrants to a strange line of floats."

Sklar Hast said, "No more were any of the rest of us—until we were forced to choose. I feel no pity for them, or for you. Undoubtedly there will be ample work for all hands. Indeed, we may formulate a new guild: the Kragen-killers. If rumor is accurate, they infest the ocean."

He left the room, went out into the night. Blasdel cast a wry look at Phyral Berwick, went to listen once more at the detecting horn. Then he likewise left the room. Berwick followed, and lowered the panel. Both joined Sklar Hast at the edge of the pad, where now several coracles were tied. A dozen men stood in the garden. Sklar Hast turned to Blasdel. "Summon your spouse, your daughters and those who test them. Explain the circumstances, and gather your belongings. The evening breeze will soon die and we cannot tow the pad."

Blasdel departed, accompanied by Berwick. Sklar Hast and the others entered the workroom, carried everything of value or utility to the coracles, including the small metal relict, the Books of Dicta, the listening horn and the summoning drum. Then all embarked in the coracles, and Barquan Blasdel's beautiful pad was left to drift solitary upon the ocean.

CHAPTER IV

Morning came to the ocean and with it the breeze from the west. The floats could no longer be seen; the ocean was a blue mirror in all directions. Sklar Hast lowered Blasdel's horn into the water, listened. Nothing could be heard. Barquan Blasdel did the same and agreed that King Kragen was nowhere near.

There were perhaps six hundred coracles in the flotilla, each carrying from four to eight persons, with as much gear, household equipment and tools as possible, together with sacks of food and water.

Late in the afternoon they noted a few medium-sized floats to the north, but made no attempt to land. King Kragen was yet too near at hand.

The late afternoon breeze arose. Rude sails were rigged and the oarsmen rested. At dusk Sklar Hast ordered all the coracles connected by lines to minimize the risk of separation. When the breeze died and seas reflected the dazzling stars, the sails were brought down and all slept.

The following day was like the first, and also the day after. On the morning of the fourth day a line of splendid floats appeared ahead, easily as large and as rich of foliage as those they had left. Sklar Hast would have preferred to sail on another week, but the folk among the coracles were fervent in their rejoicing, and he clearly would have encountered near-unanimous opposition. So the flotilla landed upon three closely adjoining floats, drove stakes into the pad surface, tethered the coracles.

Sklar Hast called an informal convocation. "In a year or two," he said, "we can live lives as comfortable as those we left behind us. But this is not enough. We left our homes because of King Kragen, who is now our deadly enemy. We shall never rest secure until we find a means to make ourselves supreme over all the kragen. To this purpose we must live different lives than we did in the old days—until King Kragen is killed. How to kill King Kragen? I wish I knew. He is a monster, impregnable to any weapon we now can use against him. So this must be our primary goal: weapons against King Kragen." Sklar Hast paused, looked around the somber group. "This is my personal feeling. I have no authority over any of you, beyond that of the immediate circumstances, which are transient. You have a right to discredit me, to think differently—in which case I will muster those who feel as I do, and sail on to still another float, where we can dedicate ourselves to the killing of King Kragen. If we are all agreed, that our souls are not our own until King Kragen is dead, then we must formalize this feeling. Authority must be given to some person or group of persons.

Responsibilities must be delegated; work must be organized. As you see I envision a life different to the old. It will be harder in some respects, easier in others. First of all, we need not feed King Kragen…"

A committee of seven members was chosen, to serve as a temporary governing body until the needs of the new community required a more elaborate system. As a matter of course Sklar Hast was named to the committee, as well as Phyral Berwick, who became the first chairman, and also Meth Cagno the Scrivener. The captured Intercessors sat aside in a sullen group and took no part in the proceedings.

The committee met for an hour, and as its first measure, ordained a census, that each man's caste and craft might be noted.

After the meeting Meth Cagno took Sklar Hast aside. "When you captured Barquan Blasdel, you brought his books."

"True."

"I have been examining these books. They are a set of the Ancient Dicta."

"So I understand."

"This is a source of great satisfaction to me. No one except the Scrivener reads the Dicta nowadays, though everyone professes familiarity. As the generations proceed, the lives of our ancestors and the fantastic environment from which they came seem more like myth than reality."

"I suppose this is true enough. I am a hoodwink by trade and only know hoodwink configurations. The Dicta are written in ancient calligraphy, which puzzles me."

"It is difficult to read, that I grant," said Cagno. "However, a patient examination of the Dicta can be profitable. Each volume represents the knowledge of one of our ancestors, to the extent that he was able to organize it. There is also a great deal of repetition and dullness; our ancestors, whatever their talents, had few literary skills. Some are vainglorious and devote pages to self-encomium. Others are anxious to explain in voluminous detail the vicissitudes which led to their presence on the Ship of Space. They seem to have been a very mixed group, from various levels of society. There are hints here and there which I, for one, do not understand. Some describe the Homeworld as a place of maniacs. Others seem to have held respected places in this society until, as they explain it, the persons in authority turned on them and instituted a savage persecution, ending, as we know, in our ancestors seizing control of the Ship of Space and fleeing to this planet."

"It is all very confusing," said Sklar Hast, "and none of it seems to have much contemporary application. For instance, they do not tell us how they boiled varnish on the Home World, or how they propelled their coracles. Do creatures like the kragen infest the Home World? If so, how do the Home Folk deal with them? Do they kill them or feed them sponges? Our ancestors are silent on these points."

Meth Cagno shrugged. "Evidently they were not overly concerned, or they would have dealt with these matters at length. But I agree that there is much they fail to make clear. As in our own case, the various castes seemed trained to explicit trades. Especially interesting are the memoirs of James Brunet. His caste, that of Counterfeiter, is now extinct among us. Most of his Dicta are rather conventional exhortations to virtue, but toward the middle of the book he says this." Here Cagno opened a book and read:

" 'To those who follow us, to our children and grandchildren, we can leave no tangible objects of value. We brought nothing to the world but ourselves and the wreckage of our lives. We will undoubtedly die here—a fate probably preferable to New Ossining, but by no means the destiny any of us had planned for ourselves. There is no way to escape. Of the entire group I alone have a technical education, most of which I have forgotten. And to what end could I turn it? This is a soft world. It consists of ocean and sea-weed. There is land nowhere. To escape—even if we had the craft to build a new ship, which we do not—we need metal and metal there is none. Even to broadcast a radio signal we need metal. None… No clay to make pottery, no silica for glass, no limestone for concrete, no ore from which to smelt metal. Presumably the ocean carries various salts, but how to extract the metal without electricity? There is iron in our blood: how to extract it? A strange helpless sensation to live on this world where the hardest substance is our own bone! We have, during our lives, taken so many things for granted, and now it seems that no one can evoke something from nothing… This is a problem on which I must think. An ingenious man can work wonders, and I, a successful counterfeiter—or, rather, almost successful—am certainly ingenious.' "

Meth Cagno paused in his reading. "This is the end of the chapter."

"He seems to be a man of no great force," mused Sklar Hast. "It is true that metal can be found nowhere." He took the bit of metal from his pocket which had once graced the workroom of Barquan Blasdel. "This is obdurate stuff indeed, and perhaps it is what we need to kill King Kragen."

Meth Cagno returned to the book. "He writes his next chapter after a lapse of months:

" 'I have considered the matter at length. But before I proceed I must provide as best I can a picture of the way the universe works, for it is clear that none of my colleagues are in any position to do so, excellent fellows though they are. Please do not suspect me of whimsey: our personalities and social worth undoubtedly vary with the context in which we live.' "

Here Cagno looked up. “I don’t completely understand his meaning here. But I suppose that the matter is unimportant.” He turned the pages. “He now goes into an elaborate set of theorizations regarding the nature of the world, which, I confess, I don’t understand. There is small consistency to his beliefs. Either he knows nothing, or is confused, or the world essentially is inconsistent. He claims that all matter is composed of less than a hundred ‘elements,’ joined together in ‘compounds.’ The elements are constructed of smaller entities: ‘electrons,’ ‘protons,’ ‘neutrons,’ which are not necessarily matter, but forces, depending on your point of view. When electrons move the result is an electric current: a substance or condition—he is not clear here—of great energy and many capabilities. Too much electricity is fatal; in smaller quantities we use it to control our bodies. According to Brunet all sorts of remarkable things can be achieved with electricity.”

“Let us provide ourselves an electric current then,” said Sklar Hast. “This may become our weapon against the kragen.”

“The matter is not so simple. In the first place the electricity must be channeled through metal wires.”

“Here is metal,” said Sklar Hast, tossing to Meth Cagno the bit of metal he had taken from Blasdel, “though it is hardly likely to be enough.”

“The electricity must also be generated,” said Cagno, “which on the Home Planet seems to be a complicated process, requiring a great deal of metal.”

“Then how do we get metal?”

“On other planets there seems to be no problem. Ore is refined and shaped into a great variety of tools. Here we have no ore. In other cases, metals are extracted from the sea, once again using electricity.”

“Hmph,” said Sklar Hast. “To procure metal, one needs electricity. To obtain the electricity, metal is required. It seems a closed circle, into which we are unable to break.”

Cagno made a dubious face. “It may well be. Brunet mentions various means to generate electricity. There is the ‘voltaic cell’—in which two metals are immersed in acid, and he describes a means to generate the acid, using water, brine, and electricity. Then there is thermo-electricity, photo-electricity, chemical electricity, electricity produced by the Rous effect, electricity generated by moving a wire near another wire in which electricity flows. He states that all living creatures produce small quantities of electricity.”

“Electricity seems rather a difficult substance to obtain,” mused Sklar Hast. “Are there no simple methods to secure metal?”

“Brunet mentions that blood contains a small quantity of iron. He suggests a method for extracting it, by using a high degree of heat. But he also points out that there is at hand no substance capable of serving as a receptacle under such extremes of heat. He states that on the Home World many plants concentrate metallic compounds, and suggests that certain of the sea-plants might do the same. But again either heat or electricity is needed to secure the pure metal."

Sklar Hast ruminated. "Our first and basic problem, as I see it, is self-protection. In short we need a weapon to kill King Kragen. It might be a device of metal—or it might be a larger and more savage kragen, if such exist…" He considered. "Perhaps you should make production of metal and electricity your goal, and let no other pursuits distract you. I am sure that the council will agree, and put at your disposal such helpers as you may need."

"I would gladly do my best."

"And I," said Sklar Hast, "I will reflect upon the kragen."

Three days later the first kragen was seen, a beast of not inconsiderable size, perhaps twenty feet in length. It came cruising along the edge of the float, and observing the men, stopped short and for twenty minutes floated placidly, swirling water back and forth with its vanes. Then slowly it swung about and continued along the line of floats.

By this time a large quantity of stalk and withe had been cut, scraped and racked, as well as a heap of root-wisp, to cure during the rigging of a rope-walk. A week later the new rope was being woven into net.

Two large pads were cut from the side of the float, stripped of rib-trussing, upper and lower membrane, then set adrift. The space thus opened would become a lagoon. Over the severed stalks sleeves were fitted with one end above water; the sap presently exuding would be removed, boiled and aged for varnish and glue. Meanwhile arbors were constructed, seeded with sponge-floss, and lowered into the lagoon. When the withe had cured, hut-frames were constructed, pad membrane stretched over the mesh and daubed inside and out with varnish.

In a month the community had achieved a rude measure of comfort. On four occasions kragen had passed by, and the fourth occurrence seemed to be a return visit of the first. On this fourth visit the kragen paused, inspected the lagoon with care. It tentatively nudged the net, backed away and presently floated off.

Sklar Hast watched the occurrence, went to inspect the new-cut stalk, which now was sufficiently cured. He laid out a pattern and work began. First a wide base was built near the mouth of the lagoon, with a substructure extending down to the main stem of the float. On this base was erected an A-frame derrick of glued withe, seventy feet tall, with integral braces, the entire structure whipped tightly with strong line and varnished. Another identical derrick was built to overhang the ocean. Before either of the derricks was completed a small kragen broke through the net to feast upon the yet unripe sponges. Sklar Hast laughed grimly at the incident. "At your next visit, you will not fare so well," he called to the beast. "May the sponges rot in your stomach!"

The kragen swam lazily off down the line of floats, unperturbed by the threat. It returned two days later. This time the derricks were guyed and in place, but not yet fitted with tackle. Again Sklar Hast reviled the beast, which this time ate with greater fastidiousness, plucking only those sponges which like popcorn had overgrown their husks. The men worked far into the night installing the strut which, when the derrick tilted out over the water, thrust high the topping-halyard to provide greater leverage.

On the next day the kragen returned, and entered the lagoon with insulting assurance: a beast somewhat smaller than that which Sklar Hast had captured on Tranque Float, but nonetheless a creature of respectable size. Standing on the float a stalwart old swindler flung a noose around the creature's turret, and on the pad a line of fifty men marched away with a heavy rope. The astonished kragen was towed to the outward leaning derrick; swung up and in. The dangling vanes were lashed; it was lowered to the float. As soon as the bulk collapsed the watching folk, crying out in glee, shoved forward, almost dancing into the gnashing mandibles. "Back, fools!" roared Sklar Hast. "Do you want to be cut in half? Back!" He was largely ignored. A dozen chisels hacked at the horny hide; clubs battered at the eyes. "Back!" raged Sklar Hast. "Back! What do you achieve by antics such as this? Back!" Daunted, the vengeful folk moved aside. Sklar Hast took chisel and mallet and as he had done on Tranque Float, cut at the membrane joining dome to turret. He was joined by four others; the channel was swiftly cut and a dozen hands ripped away the dome. Again, with pitiless outcry, the crowd surged forward. Sklar Hast's efforts to halt them were fruitless. The nerves and cords of the creature's ganglionic center were torn from the turret, while the kragen jerked and fluttered and made a buzzing sound with its mandibles. The turret was plucked clean of the wet-string fibers as well as other organs, and the kragen lay limp. Sklar Hast moved away in disgust. Another member of the Seven, Nicklas Rile, stepped forward: "Halt now—no more senseless hacking! If the kragen has bones harder than our own, we will want to preserve them for use. Who knows what use can be made of a kragen's cadaver? The hide is tough; the mandibles are harder than the deepest stalk. Let us proceed intelligently!"

Sklar Hast watched from a little distance as the crowd examined the dead beast. He had no further interest in the kragen. A planned experiment had been foiled almost as soon as the hate-driven mob had rushed forward. But there would be more kragen for his derricks; hopefully they could be noosed by the sea-derrick before they broke into the lagoon. In years to come, strong-boats or barges equipped with derricks might even go forth to hunt the kragen… He approached the kragen once again, peered into the empty turret, where now welled a viscous milky blue fluid. James Brunet, in his Dicta, had asserted that the metal iron was a constituent of human blood; conceivably other metals or metallic compounds might be discovered in the blood of a kragen. He found Meth Cagno, who had been watching from a dignified distance, and communicated his hypothesis. Cagno made no dissent. "It may well be the case. Our basic problem, however, remains as before: separating the metal from the dross."

"You have no idea how to proceed?"

Meth Cagno smiled slightly. "I have one or two ideas. In fact, tomorrow, at noon precisely, we will test one, of these ideas."

The following day, an hour before noon, Sklar Hast rowed to the isolated pad on which Meth Cagno had established his workshop. Cagno himself was hard at work on an intricate contrivance whose purpose Sklar Hast could not fathom. A rectangular frame of stalk rose ten feet in the air, supporting a six-foot hoop of woven withe in a plane parallel to the surface of the float. To the hoop was glued a rather large sheet of padskin, which had been scraped, rubbed and oiled until it was almost transparent. Below Meth Cagno was arranging a box containing ashes. As Sklar Hast watched, he mixed in a quantity of water and some gum, enough to make a gray dough, which he worked with his fingers and knuckles, to leave a saucer-shaped depression.

The sun neared the zenith; Cagno signaled two of his helpers. One climbed up the staging; the other passed up buckets of water. The first poured these upon the transparent membrane, which sagged under the weight.

Sklar Hast watched silently, giving no voice to his perplexity. The membrane, now brimming, seemed to bulge perilously. Meth Cagno, satisfied with his arrangements, joined Sklar Hast. "You are puzzled by this device; nevertheless it is very simple. You own a telescope?"

"I do. An adequately good instrument, though the gum is clouded."

"The purest and most highly refined gum discolors, and even with the most careful craftsmanship, lenses formed of gum yield distorted images, of poor magnification. On the Home World, according to Brunet, lenses are formed of a material called 'glass.' "

The sun reached the zenith; Sklar Hast's attention was caught by a peculiar occurrence in the box of damp ash. A white-hot spot had appeared; the ash began to hiss and smoke. He drew near in wonderment. "Glass would seem to be a useful material," Meth Cagno was saying. "Brunet describes it as a mixture of substances occurring in ash together with a compound called 'silica' which is found in ash but also occurs in the husks of sea-ooze: 'plankton,' so Brunet calls it. Here I have mixed ash and sea-ooze; I have constructed a water-lens to condense sunlight. I am trying to make glass…" He peered into the box, then lifted it a trifle, bringing the image of the sun to its sharpest focus. The ash glowed red, orange, yellow; suddenly it seemed to slump. With a rod Cagno pushed more ash into the center, until the wooden box gave off smoke, whereupon Cagno pulled it aside, and gazed anxiously at the molten matter in the center. "Something has happened; exactly what we will determine when the stuff is cool." He turned to his bench, brought forward another box, this half-full of powdered charcoal. In a center depression rested a cake of black-brown paste.

"And what do you have there?" asked Sklar Hast, already marveling at Cagno's ingenuity.

"Dried blood. I and my men have drained ourselves pale. Brunet reveals that blood contains iron. Now I will try to burn away the various unstable fluids and oozes, to discover what remains. I hope to find unyielding iron." Cagno thrust the box under the lens. The dried blood smoldered and smoked, then burst into a reeking flame which gave off a nauseous odor. Cagno squinted up at the sun. "The lens burns well only when the sun is overhead, so our time is necessarily limited."

"Rather than water, transparent gum might be used, which then would harden, and the sun could be followed across the sky."

"Unfortunately no gum is so clear as water," said Cagno regretfully. "Candle-plant sap is yellow. Bindlebane seep holds a blue fog."

"What if the two were mixed, so that the blue defeated the yellow? And then the two might be filtered and boiled. Or perhaps water can be coagulated with tincture of bone."

Cagno assented. "Possibly feasible, both."

They turned to watch the blood, now a glowing sponge which tumbled into cinders and then, apparently consumed, vanished upon the surface of the blazing charcoal. Cagno snatched the crucible out from under the lens. "Your blood seems not over-rich," Sklar Hast noted critically. "It might be wise to tap Barquan Blasdel and the other Intercessors; they appear a hearty lot."

Cagno clapped a cover upon the box. "We will know better when the charcoal goes black." He went to his bench, brought back another box. In powdered charcoal stood another tablet, this of black paste. "And what substance is this?" inquired Sklar Hast.

"This," said Meth Cagno, "is kragen blood, which we boiled last night. If man's blood carries iron, what will kragen blood yield? Now we discover." He thrust it under the lens. Like the human blood it began to smolder and burn, discharging a smoke even more vile than before. Gradually the tablet flaked and tumbled to the surface of the charcoal; as before Cagno removed it and covered it with a lid. Going to his first box, he prodded among the cinders with a bit of sharp bone, scooped out a congealed puddle of fused material which he laid on the bench. "Glass. Beware. It is yet hot."

Sklar Hast, using two pieces of bone, lifted the object. "So this is glass. Hmm. It hardly seems suitable for use as a telescope lens. But it may well prove useful otherwise. It seems dense and hard—indeed, almost metallic."

Cagno shook his head in deprecation. "I had hoped for greater transparency. There are probably numerous impurities in the ash and sea-ooze. Perhaps they can be removed by washing the ash or treating it with acid, or something of the sort."

"But to produce acid, electricity is necessary, or so you tell me."

"I merely quote Brunet."

"And electricity is impossible?"

Cagno pursed his lips. "That we will see. I have hopes. One might well think it impossible to generate electricity using only ash, wood, water and sea-stuff—but we shall see. Brunet offers a hint or two. But first, as to our iron..."

The yield was small: a nodule of pitted gray metal half the size of a pea. "That bit represents three flasks of blood," Cagno remarked glumly. "If we bled every vein on the float we might win sufficient iron for a small pot."

"This is not intrinsically an unreasonable proposal," said Sklar Hast. "We can all afford a flask of blood, or two, or even more during the course of months. To think—we have produced metal entirely on our own resources!"

Cagno wryly inspected the iron nodule. "There is no problem to burning the blood under the lens. If every day ten of the folk come to be bled, eventually we will sink the pad under the accumulated weight of iron." He removed the lid from the third box. "But observe here! We have misused our curses! The kragen is by no means a creature to be despised!"

On the charcoal rested a small puddle of reddish-golden metal: three times as large as the iron nodule. "I presume this metal to be copper, or one of its alloys," said Cagno. "Brunet describes copper as a dark red metal, very useful for the purpose of conducting electricity."

Sklar Hast lifted the copper from the coals, tossed it back and forth till it was cool. "Metal everywhere! Nicklas Rile has been hacking apart the kragen for its bones. He is discarding the internal organs, which are black as snuff-flower. Perhaps they should also be burned under the lens."

"Convey them here, I will burn them. And then, after we burn the kragen's liver, or whatever the organ, we might attempt to burn snuff-flowers as well."

The kragen's internal organs yielded further copper. The snuff-flowers produced only a powder of whitish-yellow ash which Meth Cagno conscientiously stored in a tube labeled: *ash of snuff-flower.*

Four days later the largest of the kragen seen so far reappeared. It came swimming in from the west, paralleling the line of floats. A pair of swindlers, returning to the float with a catch of gray-fish, were the first to spy the great black cylinder surmounted by its four-eyed turret. They bent to their oars, shouting the news ahead. A well-rehearsed plan now went into effect. A team of four young swindlers ran to a light-weight coracle, shoved off, paddled out to intercept the kragen. Behind the coracle trailed two ropes, each controlled by a gang of men. The kragen, lunging easily through the water, approached, swimming fifty yards off the float. The coracle eased forward, with one named Bade Beach going forward to stand on the gunwales. The kragen halted the motion of its vanes, to drift and eye the coracle and the derricks with flint-eyed suspicion.

The two swindlers yet at the oars eased the coracle closer. Bade Beach stood tensely, twitching a noose, while the fourth man controlled the lines to the float. The kragen, contemptuous of attack, issued a few nonplussed clicks of the mandibles, twitched the tips of its vanes, creating four whirlpools. The coracle eased closer, to within a hundred feet, eighty—sixty feet. Bade Beach bent forward. The kragen decided to punish the men for their provocative actions and thrust sharply forward. When it was but thirty feet distant, Bade Beach tossed a noose toward the turret—and missed. From the float came groans of disappointment; one of the gangs hastily jerked the coracle back. The kragen swerved, turned, made a second furious charge which brought it momentarily to within five feet of the coracle, whereupon Bade Beach dropped the noose over its turret. From the float came a cheer; both gangs hauled on their lines, one snatching the coracle back to safety, the other tightening the noose and pulling the kragen aside, almost as it touched the coracle.

Thrashing and jerking the kragen was dragged over to the sea-leaning derrick, and hoisted from the water in the same fashion as the first. This was a large beast: the derrick creaked, the float sagged; before the kragen heaved clear from the water sixty-five men were tugging on the end of the lift. The derrick tilted back, the kragen swung in over the float. The vanes were lashed, the beast lowered. Again the onlookers surged forward, laughing, shouting, but no longer exemplifying the fury with which they had attacked the first kragen.

At a distance a group of Intercessors watched with curled lips. They had not reconciled themselves to their new circumstances, and conscious of their status as the lowest of castes worked as little as possible. Chisels and mallets were plied against the kragen turret; the dome was pried loose, the nerve-nodes destroyed. Fiber buckets were brought, the body fluids were scooped out and carried off to evaporation trays.

Sklar Hast had watched from the side. This had been a large beast—about the size of King Kragen when first he had approached the Old Floats, a hundred and fifty years previously. Since they had successfully dealt with this creature, they need have small fear of any other—except King Kragen. And Sklar Hast was forced to admit that the answer was not yet known. No derrick could hoist King Kragen from the water. No line could restrain the thrust of his vanes. No float could bear his weight. Compared to King Kragen, this dead hulk now being hacked apart was a pygmy… From behind came a rush of feet; a woman tugged at his elbow, gasping and gulping in the effort to catch her breath. Sklar Hast, scanning the float in startlement, could see nothing to occasion her distress. Finally she was able to blurt: "Barquan Blasdel has taken to the sea, Barquan Blasdel is gone!"

"What!" cried Sklar Hast.

The woman told her story. For various reasons, including squeamishness and pregnancy, she had absented herself from the killing of the kragen, and kept to her hut at the far side of the float. Seated at her loom she observed a man loading bags into a coracle, but preoccupied with her own concerns she paid him little heed, and presently arose to the preparation of the evening meal. As she kneaded the pulp from which the bread-stuff known as pangolay was baked, it came to her that the man's actions had been noticeably furtive. Why had he not participated in the killing of the kragen? The man she had seen was Barquan Blasdel! The implications of the situation stunned her for a moment. Wiping her hands, she went to the hut where Blasdel and his spouse were quartered, to find no one at home. It was still possible that she was mistaken; Blasdel might even now be watching the killing of the kragen. So she hurried across the float to investigate. But on the way the conviction hardened: the man indeed had been Barquan Blasdel, and she had sought out Sklar Hast with the information.

From the first Barquan Blasdel had made no pretense of satisfaction with his altered circumstances. His former rank counted nothing, in fact aroused antagonism among his float-fellows. Barquan Blasdel grudgingly adapted himself to his new life, building sponge arbors and scraping withe. His spouse, who on Apprise Float had commanded a corps of four maidens and three garden-men, at first rebelled when Blasdel required her to bake pangolay and core sponges "like any low-caste slut," as she put it, but finally she surrendered to the protests of her empty stomach. Her daughters adopted themselves with better grace, and indeed the four youngest participated with great glee at the slaughter of the kragen. The remaining two stayed in the background, eyebrows raised disdainfully at the vulgar fervor of their sisters.

Barquan Blasdel, his spouse, his two older daughters and their lovers were missing, as was a sturdy six-man coracle together with considerable stores. Sklar Hast dispatched four coracles in pursuit, but evening had brought the west wind, and there was no way of determining whether Blasdel had paddled directly east, or had taken refuge in the jungle of floats at the eastern edge of the chain, where he could hide indefinitely.

The coracles returned to report no sign of the fugitives. The Council of Seven gathered to consider the situation. "Our mistake was leniency," complained Robin Magram, a gnarled and weather-beaten old Swindler. "These Intercessors—Barquan Blasdel and all the rest—are our enemies. We should have made a complete job of it, and strangled them. Our qualms have cost us our security."

"Perhaps," said Sklar Hast. "But I for one cannot bring myself to commit murder—even if such murder is in our best interest."

"These other Intercessors now—" Magram jerked his thumb to a group of huts near the central pinion "—what of them? Each wishes us evil. Each is now planning the same despicable act as that undertaken by Barquan Blasdel and his spouse. I feel that they should be killed at once—quietly, without malice, but with finality."

His proposal met no great enthusiasm. Arrel Sincere, a Bezzler of complete conviction and perhaps the most caste-conscious man on the float, said glumly, "What good do we achieve? If Barquan Blasdel returns to the Old Floats, our refuge is known and we must expect inimical actions."

"Not necessarily," contended Meth Cagno. "The folk of the Old Floats gain nothing by attacking us."

Sklar Hast made a pessimistic dissent. "We have escaped King Kragen, we acknowledge no overlord. Misery brings jealousy and resentment. The Intercessors can whip them to a sullen fury." He pitched his voice in a nasal falsetto. " 'Those insolent fugitives! How dare they scamp their responsibility to noble King Kragen? How dare they perform such bestial outrages against the lesser kragen? Everyone aboard the coracles! We go to punish the iconoclasts!' "

"Possibly correct," said Meth Cagno. "But the Intercessors are by no means the most influential folk of the Floats. The Arbiters will hardly agree to any such schemes."

"In essence," said Phyral Berwick, "we have no information. We speculate in a void. In fact Barquan Blasdel may lose himself on the ocean and never return to the Old Floats. He may be greeted with apathy or with excitement. We talk without knowledge. It seems to me that we should take steps to inform ourselves as to the true state of affairs: in short, that we send spies to derive this information for us."

Phyral Berwick's proposal ultimately became the decision of the Seven. They also ordained that the remaining Intercessors be guarded more carefully, until it was definitely learned whether or not Barquan Blasdel had returned to the Old Floats. If such were the case the location of the New Floats was no longer a secret, and the consensus was that the remaining Intercessors should likewise be allowed to return, should they choose to do so. Nicklas Rile considered the decision soft-headed. "Do you think they would warrant us like treatment in a similar situation? Remember, they planned that King Kragen should waylay us!"

"True enough," said Arrel Sincere wearily, "but what of that? We can either kill them, hold them under guard, or let them go their ways, the last option being the least taxing and the most honorable."

Nicklas Rile made no further protest, and the council then concerned itself with the details of the projected spy operation. None of the coracles at hand were considered suitable, and it was decided to build a coracle of special design—long, light, low to the water, with two sails of fine weave to catch every whisper of wind. Three men were named to the operation, all originally of Almack Float, a small community far to the east, in fact next to Sconia, the end of the chain. None of the three men had acquaintance on Apprise and so stood minimal chances of being recognized.

The coracle was built at once. A light keel of laminated and glued withe was shaped around pegs; ribs were bent and lashed into place; diagonal ribs were attached to these, then the whole frame was covered with four layers of varnished pad-skin.

At mid-morning of the fourth day after Barquan Blasdel's flight, the coracle, which was almost a canoe, departed to the east, riding easily and swiftly over the sunny blue water. For three hours it slid along the line of floats, each an islet bedecked in blue, green and purple verdure, surmounted by the arching fronds of prime plant, each surrounded by its constellation of smaller pads. The coracle reached the final float of the group and struck out east across the water. Water swirled and sparkled behind the long oars; the men in their short-sleeved white smocks working easily. Afternoon waned; the rain clouds formed and came scudding with black brooms hanging below. After the rain came sunset, making a glorious display among the broken clouds. The breeze began to blow from the west; the three men crouched and rowed with only sufficient force to maintain headway. Then came the mauve dusk with the constellations appearing and then night with the stars blazing down on the glossy black water. The men took turns sleeping, and the night passed. Before dawn the favoring wind rose; the sails were set, the coracle bubbled ahead, with a chuckling of bow-wave and wake. The second day was like the first. Just before dawn of the third day the men lowered the horn into the water and listened.

Silence.

The men stood erect, looked into the west. Allowing for the increased speed of their passage, Tranque Float should be near at hand. But nothing could be seen but the blank horizons.

The dawn wind came; the sails were set, the coracle surged west. At noon the men, increasingly dubious, ceased paddling, and once more searched the horizons carefully. As before there was nothing visible save the line dividing dark blue from bright blue. The floats by now should be well within sight. Had they veered too far north or too far south?

The men deliberated, and decided that while their own course had generally been true west, the original direction of flight might have been something south of east: hence the floats in all probability lay behind the northern horizon. They agreed to paddle four hours to the north, then if nothing were seen, to return to the south.

Toward the waning of afternoon, with the rain clouds piling up, far smudges showed themselves. Now they halted, lowered the horn, to hear *crunch crunch crunch,* with startling loudness. The men twisted the tube, to detect the direction of the sound. It issued from the north. Crouching low they listened, ready to paddle hastily away if the sound grew louder. But it seemed to lessen and the direction veered to the east. Presently it died to near inaudibility, and the men proceeded.

The floats took on substance, extending both east and west; soon the characteristic profiles could be discerned, and then the hoodwink towers. Dead ahead was Aumerge, with Apprise Float yet to the west.

So they paddled up the chain, the floats with familiar and beloved names drifting past, floats where their ancestors had lived and died: Aumerge, Quincunx, Fay, Hastings, Quatrefoil, with its curious cloverleaf configuration, and then the little outer group, the Bandings, and beyond, after a gap of a mile, Apprise Float.

The sun set, the hoodwink towers began to flicker, but the configurations could not be read. The men paddled the coracle toward Apprise. Verdure bulked up into the sky; the sounds and odors of the Old Floats wafted across the water, inflicting nostalgic pangs upon each of the men. They landed in a secluded little cove which had been described to them by Phyral Berwick, covered the coracle with leaves and rubbish. According to the plan, two remained by the coracle, while the third, one Henry Bastaff, moved across the float toward the central common and Apprise Market.

Hundreds of people were abroad on this pleasant evening, but Henry Bastaff thought their mood to be weary and even a trifle grim. He went to the ancient Apprise Inn, which claimed to be the oldest building of the floats: a long shed beamed with twisted oldstalks, reputedly cut at the astounding depth of three hundred feet. Within was a long bar of laminated strips, golden-brown with wax and use; shelves behind displayed jars and tubes of arrack, beer, and spirits of life, while buffets to each end offered various delicacies and sweetmeats. To the front wide eaves thatched with garwort frond and lit by yellow and red lanterns protected several dozen tables and benches where travelers rested and lovers kept rendezvous. Henry Bastaff seated himself where he could watch both the Apprise hoodwink tower and that of Quatrefoil to the east. The serving maid approached; he ordered beer and nut-wafers. As he drank and ate he listened to conversations at nearby tables and read the messages which flickered up and down the line of floats.

The conversations were uninformative; the hoodwink messages were the usual compendium of announcements, messages, banter. Then suddenly in mid-message came a blaze, all eighteen lights together, to signal news of great importance. Henry Bastaff sat up straight on the bench.

"*Important...information! This...afternoon...Apprise...Intercessor...Barquan Blasdel...kidnaped...by...the...rebels...returned...to...the...Floats...with...his...spouse...and...several...dependents. They...have...a...harrowing...tale...to...tell. The...rebels...are...established...on...a...float...to...the...east...where...they...kill ...kragen...with...merciless...glee...and...plan...a...war...of...extermination ...upon...the...folk...of...the...old...floats. Barquan Blasdel...escaped...and... after...an...unnerving...voyage...across...the...uncharted...ocean...late... today...landed...on...Green Lamp Float. He...has...called...for...an... immediate...convocation...to...consider...what...measures...to...take... against...the...rebels...who...daily...wax...in...arrogance.*"

CHAPTER V

Four days later Henry Bastaff reported to the Seven. "Our arrival was precarious, for our initial direction took us many miles to the south of the Old Floats. Nevertheless we arrived. Apparently Blasdel experienced even worse difficulties for he reached Green Lamp Float about the same time that we landed on Apprise. I sat at the Old Tavern when the news came, and I saw great excitement. The people seemed more curious than vindictive, even somewhat wistful. A convocation was called for the following day. Since the folk of Almack Float would attend, I thought it best that Maible and Barway remain hidden. I stained my face, shaved eyebrows, mustache and hair, and at the convocation looked eye to eye with my Uncle Fodor the withe-peeler, who never gave a second glance.

"The convocation was vehement and lengthy. Barquan Blasdel resumed his rank of Apprise Intercessor. In my opinion Vrink Smathe, who had succeeded to the post, found no joy in Blasdel's return.

"With great earnestness Blasdel called for a punitive expedition. He spoke of those who had departed as 'iconoclasts,' 'monsters,' 'vicious scum of the world, which it was the duty of all decent folk to expunge.'

"He aroused only lukewarm attention. No one showed heart for the project. The new Intercessors in particular were less than enthusiastic. Blasdel accused them of coveting their new posts, which they would lose if the old Intercessors returned. The new Intercessors refuted the argument with great dignity. 'Our concern is solely for the lives of men,' they said. 'What avail is there in destroying these folk? They are gone; good riddance. We shall maintain our ancient ways with more dedication because the dissidents have departed.'

"One of the new Intercessors had a crafty thought: 'Of course, if by some means we can direct King Kragen's attention to these fugitives, that is a different story.'

"Barquan Blasdel was forced to be content with this much. 'How can we do this?' "

" 'By our usual means for summoning King Kragen: how else?'

"Blasdel agreed. 'It is necessary to hurry. These evil folk kill kragen and smelt metal from the blood. They plan mischief against us, and we must rebuff them with decisive severity.'

"There was further discussion, but no clear resolutions, which exasperated Barquan Blasdel. The convocation dissolved; we caught the evening wind to the east."

The Seven considered Henry Bastaff's report. "At least we are in no immediate peril," ruminated Robin Magram. "It appears that our surest guarantee of security is our custody of the old Intercessors, who would supersede the new officials if rescued. So here is a powerful deterrent against any large-scale attack."

"Still, we always must fear discovery by King Kragen," stated Sklar Hast. "King Kragen is our basic enemy; it is King Kragen whom we must destroy."

After a minute's silence Arrel Sincere said, "That, at the moment, is in the nature of a remote day-dream. In the meantime we must prepare for various contingencies, including demolishment by King Kragen of our new facilities. Also we must maintain a continued source of information: in short, spies must presently return to the Old Floats."

Henry Bastaff looked uncomfortably at his mates. "I will volunteer, for at least one more trip. Much effort and delay could be avoided if it were possible to sail with more assurance of reaching the destination."

Meth Cagno said, "Brunet mentions the 'compass'—an iron needle which points always to the north. The iron is 'magnetized' by wrapping it in a coil of copper strands and passing an electric current through these strands. We have copper, we have iron."

"But no electricity."

"No electricity," agreed Meth Cagno.

"And no means of obtaining electricity."

"As to that—we shall see."

Four days later Meth Cagno summoned the Seven to his workshop. "You will now see electricity produced."

"What? In that device?" Sklar Hast inspected the clumsy apparatus. To one side a tube of hollow stalk five inches in diameter and twenty feet high was supported by a scaffold. The base was contained at one end of a long box holding what appeared to be wet ashes. The far end of the box was closed by a slab of compressed carbon, into which were threaded copper wires. At the opposite end, between the tube and wet ashes was another slab of compressed carbon.

"This is admittedly a crude device, unwieldy to operate and of no great efficiency," said Meth Cagno. "It does however meet our peculiar requirements: which is to say, it produces electricity without metal, through the agency of water pressure. Brunet describes it in his Dicta. He calls it the 'Rous machine.' The tube is filled with water, which is thereby forced through the mud, which is a mixture of ashes and sea-slime. The water carries an electric charge which it communicates to the porous carbon as it seeps through. By this means a small but steady and quite dependable source of electricity is at our hand. As you may have guessed, I have already tested the device, and so can speak with confidence." He turned, snapped his fingers, and his helpers mounted the scaffold carrying buckets of water which they poured into the tube. Meth Cagno connected the wires to a coil of several dozen revolutions. He brought forward a dish. On a cork rested a small rod of iron.

"I have already magnetized this iron," said Cagno. "Note how it points to the north? Now—I bring it near the end of the coil. See it jerk! Electricity is flowing in the wire!"

The other members of the Seven were impressed. "And this iron needle will now serve to guide Henry Bastaff?"

"So I believe. But the Rous machine provides an even more dramatic possibility. With electricity we can disassociate sea-water to produce, after certain operations, the acid of salt, and a caustic of countering properties as well. The acid can then be used to produce more highly concentrated streams of electricity—if we are able to secure more metal. There is iron in our blood: I ask myself, where does the iron originate? Which of our foods contains the iron? I plan to reduce each of our foods under the lens, as well as any other distinctive substance which might yield a concentration of metal." He turned, went to the table, returned with a glistening object. "Look. A bottle of glass. Bolin Hyse has produced this bottle. He fashioned a tube of copper, fixed it to a longer tube of withe, dipped the copper into molten glass and blew. The result—" Meth Cagno inspected the object critically "—is not beautiful. The glass is gray and streaked with ash. The shape is uncertain. Nevertheless—here is a glass bottle, produced from ash and sea-ooze. Eventually, we will be building devices of great intricacy."

"Subject to the indulgence of King Kragen," muttered Sklar Hast.

Meth Cagno threw up his hands. "King Kragen bah! We shall kill him. When next a kragen is brought to the derrick, allow me to deal with it. There are tests I wish to make."

CHAPTER VI

On the world which had no name, there were no seasons, no variations of climate except those to be found by traversing the latitudes. Along the equatorial doldrums, where floats of sea-plant grew in chains and clots, each day was like every other, and the passage of a year could be detected only by watching the night sky. Though the folk had small need for accurate temporal distinctions, each day was numbered and each year named for some significant event. A duration of twenty-two years was a "surge," and was also reckoned by number. Hence a given date might be known as the 349th day in the Year of Malvinon's Deep Dive during the Tenth Surge. Time-reckoning was almost exclusively the province of the Scriveners. To most of the folk life seemed as pellucid and effortless as the glassy blue sea at noon.

King Kragen's attack upon Tranque Float occurred toward the year's end, which thereupon became the Year of Tranque's Abasement, and it was generally assumed that the following year would be known as the Year of the Dissenters' Going.

As the days passed and the year approached its midpoint, Barquan Blasdel, Apprise Intercessor, instead of allowing the memory of his kidnaping to grow dim, revived it daily with never-flagging virulence. Each evening saw a memorandum from Barquan Blasdel flicker up and down the chain of floats: "Vigilance is necessary. The dissidents are led by seven men of evil energy. They flout the majesty of King Kragen; they despise the folk who maintain old traditions and most especially the Intercessors. They must be punished and taught humility. Think well on this matter. Ask yourself how may the dissidents most expeditiously be chastened?"

The other Intercessors, while politely attending Blasdel's urgencies, did little to give them effect. Blasdel daily became more hectic. At a Conclave of Notables his demands that the floats assemble an armada to invade the New Floats and destroy the dissidents was vetoed by the Arbiters, Guild Masters and Caste Chiefs, on the grounds of utter infeasibility and pointlessness. "Let them be," growled Emacho Feroxibus, Chief of the Quatrefoil Bezzlers. "So long as they do not molest us, why should we molest them? I for one don't care to risk drowning for so dismal a cause."

Barquan Blasdel, containing his temper, explained carefully, "The matter is more complex than this. Here is a group who have fled in order to avoid paying their due to King Kragen. If they are allowed to prosper, to make profit of their defection, then other folk may be tempted to wonder, why do we not do likewise? If the sin of kragen-killing becomes vulgar recreation, where is reverence? Where is continuity? Where is obedience to High Authority?"

"This may be true," stated Providence Dringle, Chief Hoodwink for the Populous Equity Float. "Nonetheless in my opinion the cure is worse than the complaint. And to risk a heretical opinion, I must say the benefits we derive from High Authority no longer seem commensurate with the price we pay."

Blasdel swung about in shock, as did the other Intercessors. "May I ask your meaning?" Blasdel inquired icily.

"I mean that King Kragen consumes six to seven bushels of choice sponges daily. He maintains his rule in the waters surrounding the floats, true, but what do we need fear from the lesser kragen? By your own testimony the dissidents have developed a method to kill the kragen with facility."

Blasdel said with frigid menace, "I can not overlook the fact that your remarks are identical to the preposterous ravings of the dissidents, who so rightly shall be obliterated."

"Do not rely on my help," said Providence Dringle.

"Nor mine," said Emacho Feroxibus.

The conclave had divided into two antagonistic camps, the Intercessors and certain others supporting Barquan Blasdel, though few favored the more extreme of his propositions.

From the foliage which surrounded the scene of the conclave came a crash and a muttered exclamation. A number of men sprang into the shrubbery. There was a confused scuffle, the sound of blows and exclamations, and presently a man was dragged out into the lamplight. His skin was dark, his face was bland and bare of hair.

Barquan Blasdel marched forward. "Who are you? Why do you lurk in these forbidden precincts?"

The man staggered and blinked foolishly. "Is this the tavern? Pour out the arrack, pour for all! I am a stranger on Apprise, I would know the quality of your food and drink."

Emacho Feroxibus snorted, "The fool is drunk, turn him off the float."

"No!" roared Blasdel, jerking forward in excitement. "This is a dissident, this is a spy! I know him well! He has shaved his head and his face, but never can he defeat my acuity! He is here to learn our secrets!"

The group turned their attention upon the man, who blinked even more vehemently. "A spy? Not I. I came to find the Old Tavern."

Blasdel sniffed the air in front of the captive's face. "There is no odor: neither beer nor arrack nor spirits of life. Come! All must satisfy themselves as to this so that there will be no subsequent contradictions and vacillations."

"What is your name?" demanded Vogel Womack, the Parnassus Arbiter. "Your float and your caste?"

The captive took a deep breath, cast off his pretense of drunkenness. "I am Henry Bastaff. I am a dissident. I am here to learn if you plan evil against us. That is my sole purpose."

"A spy!" cried Barquan Blasdel in a voice of horror. "A self-confessed spy!"

"It is a serious matter," said Emacho Feroxibus, "but the truth of the matter is undoubtedly as he has averred."

The Intercessors set up a chorus of indignant hoots and jibes. Barquan Blasdel said, "He is guilty of at least a double offense: first, the various illegalities entering into his dissidence; and second, his insolent attempt to conspire against us, the staunch and the faithful. The crime has occurred on Apprise Float, and affects our relations with King Kragen. Hence, I, Barquan Blasdel, am compelled to demand an extreme penalty. Parler Denk, the new Apprise Arbiter, in such instance, can implement such a penalty by simple executive command, without consultation with the council. Arbiter Denk, what is your response?"

"Be not hasty," warned Vogel Womack. "Tomorrow the man's deed will not appear so grave."

Barquan Blasdel ignored him. "Parler Denk, what is your response?"

"I agree, in all respects. The man is a vile dissident, an agent of turmoil and a spy. He must suffer an extreme penalty. To this declaration there will be allowed no appeal."

On the following day a significant alteration was made in the method by which King Kragen was tendered his customary oblation. Previously, when King Kragen approached a lagoon with the obvious intent of feasting, arbors overgrown with sponges were floated to the edge of the net, for King Kragen to pluck with his palps. Now the sponges were plucked, heaped upon a great tray and floated forth between a pair of coracles. When the tray was in place, Barquan Blasdel went to his sanctum. King Kragen was close at hand; the scraping of his chitin armor sounded loud in Blasdel's listening device. Blasdel sounded his submarine horn; the scraping ceased, then began once more, increasing in intensity. King Kragen was approaching.

He appeared from the east, turret and massive torso riding above the surface, the great rectangular swimming platform gliding through the ocean on easy strokes of his vanes.

The forward eyes noted the offering. King Kragen approached casually, inspected the tray, began to scoop the sponges into his maw with his forward palps.

From the float folk watched in somber speculation mingled with awe. Barquan Blasdel came gingerly forth to stand on the edge of the pad, to gesticulate in approval as King Kragen ate.

The tray was empty. King Kragen made no motion to depart; Blasdel swung about, gestured to an understudy. "The sponges: how many were offered?"

"Seven bushels. King Kragen usually eats no more."

"Today he seems to hunger. Are others plucked?"

"Those for the market: another five bushels."

"They had best be tendered King Kragen; it is not well to stint." While King Kragen floated motionless, the coracles were pulled to the float, another five bushels were poured upon the tray, and the tray thrust back toward King Kragen. Again he ate, consuming all but a bushel or two. Then, replete, he submerged till only his turret remained above the water. And there he remained, moving sluggishly a few feet forward, a few feet backward.

Nine days later a haggard Denis Maible reported the capture of Henry Bastaff to the Seven. "On the following day King Kragen had not yet moved. It was clear that the new method of feeding had impressed him favorably. So at noon the tray was again filled, with at least ten bushels of sponge, and again King Kragen devoured the lot.

"During this time we learned that Henry Bastaff had been captured and condemned—indeed the news had gone out over the hoodwink towers—but we could not discover where he was imprisoned or what fate had been planned for him.

"On the third day Blasdel made an announcement, to the effect that the dissident spy had sinned against King Kragen and King Kragen had demanded the privilege of executing him.

"At noon the tray went out. At the very top was a wide board supporting a single great sponge; and below, the usual heap. King Kragen had not moved fifty yards for three days. He approached the tray, reached for the topmost sponge. It seemed fastened to the board. King Kragen jerked, and so decapitated Henry Bastaff, whose head had been stuffed into the sponge. It was a horrible sight, with the blood spouting upon the pile of sponges. King Kragen seemed to devour them with particular relish.

"With Henry Bastaff dead, we no longer had reason to delay—except for curiosity. King Kragen showed no signs of moving, of visiting the other floats. It was clear that he found the new feeding system to his liking. By then, Apprise Float was bereft of sponges.

"The Intercessors conferred by hoodwink and apparently arrived at a means of dealing with the situation. King Kragen's meal on the fourth day was furnished by Granolt Float and ferried to Apprise by coracle. On the fifth day the sponges were brought from Sankeston. It appears that King Kragen is now a permanent guest at Apprise Float… On the evening of the fifth day we launched our coracle and returned to New Float."

The Seven were silent. Phyral Berwick finally made a sound of nausea. "It is a repulsive situation. One which I would like to change."

Sklar Hast looked toward Meth Cagno. "There is the man who smelts metal."

Meth Cagno smiled wryly. "Our enterprises are multiplying. We have found a number of sources which when burnt in sufficiently large quantities produce at least four different metals. None seem to be iron. We have bled everyone on the float, twice or three times: this blood has yielded several pounds of iron, which we have hammered and refined until now it is hard and keen beyond all belief. Our electrical device has produced twenty-four flasks of acid of salt, which we maintain in bottles blown by our glass shop, which is now an establishment completely separated from the smelting."

"This is encouraging and interesting," said Robin Magram, "but what will it avail against King Kragen?"

Meth Cagno pursed his lips. "I have not yet completed my experiments, and I am unable to make an unequivocal answer. But in due course our preparations will be complete."

CHAPTER VII

Some two hundred days later, toward the end of the year, swindlers working the waters to the east of Tranque Float spied the armada from the east. There were two dozen canoes sheathed with a dull black membrane. Each canoe carried a crew of thirty, who wore helmets and corselets of the same black substance, and carried lances tipped with orange metal. They accompanied a strange craft, like none ever seen before along the floats. It was rectangular, and rode on four parallel pontoons. A bulwark of the black sheathing completely encircled the barge, to a height of five feet. Fore and aft rose stout platforms on which were mounted massive crossbow-like contrivances, the arms of which were laminated stalk and kragen chitin, and the string cables woven from strips of kragen leather. The hold of the barge contained two hundred glass vats, each of two quarts capacity, each two-thirds full of pale liquid. The barge was propelled by oars—a score on either side—and moved with not inconsiderable speed.

The swindlers paddled with all speed to Tranque Float and the hoodwink towers flickered an alarm: *The...dissidents...are...returning...in...force! They...come...in...strange...black...canoes...and...an...even...more...peculiar... black...barge. They...show...no...fear.*

The flotilla continued up the line of floats: Thrasneck, Bickle, Green Lamp, and at last Fay, Quatrefoil, and finally Apprise.

In the water before the lagoon lolled King Kragen—a bloated monstrous King Kragen, dwarfing the entire flotilla.

King Kragen swung about, the monstrous vanes sucking whirlpools into the ocean. The eyes, with opalescent films shifting back and forth within, fixed upon the black sheathing of canoe, barge and armor, and he seemed to recognize the substance as kragen hide, for he emitted a snort of terrible displeasure, jerked his vanes, and the ocean sucked and swirled.

The barge swung sidewise to King Kragen. The two crossbows, each cocked and strung, each armed with an iron harpoon smelted from human blood, were aimed.

King Kragen sensed menace. Why otherwise should men be so bold? He twitched his vanes, inched forward—to within a hundred feet. Then he lunged. Vanes dug the water; with an ear-shattering shriek King Kragen charged, mandibles snapping.

The men at the crossbows were pale as sea-foam; their fingers twitched. Sklar Hast turned to call, "Fire!" but his voice caught in his throat and what he intended for an incisive command sounded as a startled stammer. But the command was understood. The left crossbow thudded, snapped, sang: the harpoon, trailing a black cable, sprang at King Kragen's turret, buried itself. King Kragen hissed.

The right crossbow fired; the second harpoon stabbed deep into the turret. Sklar Hast motioned with his hand to the men in the hold. "Connect." The men joined copper to copper. In the hold two hundred voltaic cells, each holding ten thin-leaved cathodes and ten thin-leaved anodes, connected first in four series of fifty, and these four series in parallel, poured a gush of electricity along the copper cables wrapped in varnished padskin, which led to the harpoons. Into King Kragen's turret poured the energy, and King Kragen went stiff. His vanes protruded at right angles to his body. Sklar Hast said to Meth Cagno, "Your experiments seem to be as valid as with the lesser kragen—luckily."

"I never doubted," said Meth Cagno.

Sklar Hast waved to the canoes. They swung toward King Kragen, beaching on the rigid subsurface platform. The men swarmed up the torso. With mallets and copper chisels they attacked the lining between dome and turret wall. There was thirty feet of seam, but many hands at work. The lining was broken; bars were inserted into the crack; all heaved. With a splitting sound the dome was dislodged. It slid over and into the water; the men leapt down into the knotted gray cords and nodes and began hacking.

On Apprise Float a great throng had gathered. One man, running back and forth, was Barquan Blasdel. Finally he persuaded several score of men to embark in coracles and attack the flotilla. Eight black canoes were on guard. Paddles dug the water, the canoes picked up momentum, crashed into the foremost coracles, crushing the fragile shells, throwing the men into the water. The canoes backed away, turned toward the other coracles, which retreated.

Out in the lagoon King Kragen's nerve nodes had been cast into the sea. The harpoons were extracted, the flow of electricity extinguished.

King Kragen floated limp, a lifeless hulk. The men plunged into the sea to wash themselves, clambered back up on the dead swimming platform, boarded their canoes.

The barge now eased toward Apprise Float. Barquan Blasdel gesticulated to the folk like a crazy man. "To arms! Stakes, chisels, mallets, knives, bludgeons! Smite the miscreants!"

Sklar Hast called to the throng, "King Kragen is dead. What do you say to this?"

There was silence; then a faint cheer and a louder cheer, and finally uproarious celebration.

Sklar Hast pointed a finger at Barquan Blasdel. "That man must die. He murdered Henry Bastaff. He has fed your food to the vile King Kragen. He would have continued doing so until King Kragen overgrew the entire float."

Barquan Blasdel made the mistake of turning to flee—an act which triggered the counter-impulse to halt him. When he was touched, he smote, and again he erred, for the blow brought a counter-blow and Barquan Blasdel was presently torn to pieces.

"What now?" called the crowd. "What now, Sklar Hast?"

"Nothing whatever, unless you choose to kill the other Intercessors. King Kragen is dethroned; our duty is done. We now return to the New Floats."

From the shore someone called out, "Come ashore, men of the New Floats, and share our great joy. Greet your old friends, who long have been saddened at your absence! Tonight the arrack will flow and we will play the pipes and dance in the light of our yellow lamps!"

Sklar Hast shook his head, waved his hand and called back: "Now we return to the New Floats. In a week certain of us will return, and the weeks after that will see constant traffic between Old and New Floats, and out to floats still unknown. King Kragen is dead, the lesser kragen are our prey, so who is there to stop us? Now that we know metal and glass and electricity, all things are possible. Rejoice with all our good will. For now, farewell."

The barge and the canoes swung about; oars and paddles dipped into the ocean, the black flotilla receded into the east, and disappeared.

THE MASTER KEY

by Poul Anderson (1926 - 2001)
Analog, July

Poul Anderson labored hard and ably in the service of science fiction for more than fifty years—his first story, the memorable "Tomorrow's Children," was published in 1947—and his distinguished career was recognized by the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1998 with its Grand Master Nebula award. He was equally at home in the hard-science branch of the genre, in unabashed space opera, and in fantasy: among his important novels in each of these categories were *Tau Zero* (1967), *The Long Way Home* (1955), and *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1953). But this is only to scratch the surface of a vast output of award-winning novels and stories written with enormous skill and notable visionary power.

Much of Anderson's science-fiction was set in a single future-history sequence, involving the spacefaring Polesotechnic League. His two main protagonists in this sequence, the Terran agent Dominic Flandry and the robust, wily merchant prince Nicholas van Rijn, were each featured in long series of novels. "The Master Key," reprinted here, is a Nicholas van Rijn story that amply demonstrates Poul Anderson's ability to spin a yarn.

Once upon a time there was a king who set himself above the foreign merchants. What he did is of no account now; it was long ago and on another planet, and besides, the wench is dead. Harry Stenvik and I hung him by the seat of his trousers from his tallest minaret, in sight of all the people, and the name of the Polesotechnic League was great in the land. Then we made inroads on the stock in trade of the Solar Spice & Liquors Company and swore undying brotherhood.

Now there are those who maintain that Nicholas van Rijn has a cryogenic computer in that space used by the ordinary Terran for storing his heart. This may be so. But he does not forget a good workman. And I know no reason why he should have invited me to dinner except that

Harry would be there and—this being the briefest of business trips to Earth for me—we would probably have no other chance of meeting.

The flitter set me off atop the Winged Cross, where van Rijn keeps what he honestly believes is a modest little penthouse apartment. A summer's dusk softened the mass of lesser buildings that stretched to the horizon and beyond; Venus had wakened in the west and Chicago Integrate was opening multitudinous lights. This high, only a low machine throb reached my ears. I walked among roses and jasmine to the door. When it scanned me and dilated, Harry was waiting. We fell into each other's arms and praised God with many loud violations of one of His commandments.

Afterward we stood apart and looked. "You haven't changed much," he lied. "Mean and ugly as ever. Methane in the air must agree with you."

"Ammonia, where I've been of late," I corrected him. "Occasional bullets and endless dickering. *You're* disgustingly sleek and contented. How's Sigrid?" As it must to all men, domesticity had come to him. In his case it lasted, and he built a house on the cliffs above Hardanger Fjord and raised mastiffs and sons. Myself—but that also is irrelevant.

"Fine. She sends her love and a box of her own cookies. Next time you must wangle a longer stay and come see us."

"The boys?"

"Same." The soft Norse accent roughened the least bit. "Per's had his troubles, but they are mending. He's here tonight."

"Well, great." The last I'd heard of Harry's oldest son, he was an apprentice aboard one of van Rijn's ships, somewhere in the Hercules region. But that was several years ago, and you can rise fast in the League if you survive. "I imagine he has master's rank by now."

"Yes, quite newly. Plus an artificial femur and a story to tell. Come, let's join them."

Hm-m-m, I thought, so Old Nick was economizing on his bird-killing stones again. He had enough anecdotes of his own that he didn't need to collect them, unless they had some special use to him. A gesture of kindness might as well be thrown into the interview.

We passed through the foyer and crossed a few light-years of trollcat rug to the far end of the living room. Three men sat by the viewer wall, at the moment transparent to sky and city. Only one of them rose. He had been seated a little to one side, in a tigery kind of relaxed-alertness a stranger to me, dark and lean, with a blaster at his hip that had seen considerable service.

Nicholas van Rijn wallowed his bulk deeper into his lounger, hoisted a beer stein and roared, "Ha! Welcome to you, Captain, and you will maybe have a small drink like me before dinner?" After which he tugged his goatee and muttered, "Gabriel will tootle before I get your bepestered Anglic through this poor old noggin. I think I have just called myself a small drink."

I bowed to him as is fitting to a merchant prince, turned, and gave Per Stenvik my hand. "Excuse my staying put," he said. His face was still pale and gaunt; health was coming back, but youth never would. "I got a trifle clobbered."

"So I heard," I answered. "Don't worry, it'll heal up. I hate to think how much of me is replacement by now, but as long as the important parts are left—"

"Oh, yes, I'll be O.K. Thanks, of course, to Manuel. Uh, Manuel Felipe Gomez y Palomares of Nueva Mexico. My ensign."

I introduced myself with great formality, according to what I knew of the customs of those poor and haughty colonists from the far side of Arcturus. His courtesy was equal, before he turned to make sure the blanket was secure around Per's legs. Nor did he go back to his seat and his glass of claret before Harry and I were chaired. A human servant—male, in this one van Rijn establishment—brought us our orders, akvavit for Harry and a martini for me. Per fiddled with a glass of Ansan vermouth.

"How long will you be home?" I asked him after the small talk had gone by.

"As long as needful," Harry said quickly.

"No more, though," van Rijn said with equal speed. "Not one millimoment more can he loaf than nature must have; and he is young and strong."

"Pardon, señor," Manuel said—how softly and deferentially, and with what a clang of colliding stares. "I would not gainsay my superiors. But my duty is to know how it is with my captain, and the doctors are fools. He shall rest not less than till the Day of the Dead; and then surely, with the Nativity so near, the señor will not deny him the holidays at home?"

Van Rijn threw up his hands. "Everyone, they call me apocalyptic beast," he wailed, "and I am only a poor lonely old man in a sea of grievances, trying so hard to keep awash. One good boy with promises I find, I watch him from before his pants dry out for I know his breed, I give him costly schooling in hopes he does not turn out another curdlebrain, and no sooner does he not but he is in the locker and my fine new planet gets thrown to the wolves!"

"Lord help the wolves," Per grinned. "Don't worry, sir, I'm as anxious to get back as you are."

"Hoy, hoy, I am not going. I am too old and fat, ah, you think you have troubles now but wait till time has gnawed you down to a poor old wheezer like me who has not even any pleasures left. Abdul! Abdul, you jelly-legs, bring drink, you want we should dry up and puff away? What, only me ready for a refill?"

"Do you really want to see that Helheim again?" Harry asked, with a stiff glance at van Rijn.

"Judas, yes," Per said. "It's just waiting for the right man. A whole *world,* Dad! Don't you remember?"

Harry looked through the wall and nodded. I made haste to intrude on his silence. "What were you after, Per?"

"Everything," the boy said. "I told you it's an entire planet. Not one per cent of the land surface has been mapped."

"Huh? Not even from orbit?"

Manuel's expression showed me what they thought of orbital maps.

"But for a starter, what attracted us in the first place, furs and herbs," Per said. Wordlessly, Manuel took a little box from his pocket, opened it, and handed it to me. A bluish-green powder of leaves lay within. I tasted. There was a sweet-sour flavor with wild overtones, and the odor went to the oldest, deepest part of my brain and roused memories I had not known were lost.

"The chemicals we have not yet understood and synthesized," van Rijn rumbled around the cigar he was lighting. "Bah! What do my chemists do all day but play happy fun games in the lab alcohol? And the furs, *ja,* I have Lupescu of the Peltery volcanomaking that he must buy them from me. He is even stooping to spies, him, he has the ethics of a paranoid weasel. Fifteen thousand he spent last month alone, trying to find where that planet is."

"How do you know how much he spent?" Harry asked blandly.

Van Rijn managed to look smug and hurt at the same time. Per said with care: "I'd better not mention the co-ordinates myself. It's out Pegasus way. A G9 dwarf star, about half as luminous as Sol. Eight planets, one of them terrestroid. Brander came upon it in the course of survey, thought it looked interesting, and settled down to learn more. He'd really only time to tape the language of the locality where he was camped, and do the basic-basic planetography and bionics. But he did find out about the furs and herbs. So I was sent to establish a trading post."

"His first command," Harry said, unnecessarily on anyone's account but his own.

"Trouble with the natives, eh?" I asked.

"Trouble is not the word," van Rijn said. "The word is not for polite ears." He dove into his beer stein and came up snorting. "After all I have done for them, the saints keep on booting me in the soul like this."

"But we seem to have it licked," Per said gravely.

Ah. You think so?" Van Rijn waggled a hairy forefinger at him. "That is what we should like to be more sure of, boy, before we send out and maybe lose some expensive ships."

"Y algunos hombres buenos," Manuel muttered, so low he could scarcely be heard. One hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

"I have been reading the reports from Brander's people," van Rijn said. "Also your own. I think maybe I see a pattern. When you have been swindling on so many planets like me, new captain, you will have analogs at your digits for much that is new…Ah, pox and pity it is to get jaded!" He puffed a smoke ring that settled around Per's bright locks. "Still, you are never sure. I think sometimes God likes a little practical joke on us poor mortals, when we get too cockish. So I jump on no conclusions before I have heard from your own teeth how it was. Reports, even on visitape, they have no more flavor than what my competition sells. In you I live again the fighting and merrylarks, everything that is now so far behind me in my doting."

This from the single handed conqueror of Borthu, Diomedes, and t'Kéla!

"Well—" Per blushed and fumbled with his glass. "There really isn't a lot to tell, you know. I mean, each of you freemen has been through so much more than, uh, one silly episode—"

Harry gestured at the blanketed legs. "Nothing silly there," he said.

Per's lips tightened. "I'm sorry. You're right. Men died."

Chiefly because it is not good to dwell overly long on those lost from a command of one's own, I said, "What's the planet like? 'Terrestroid' is a joke. They sit in an Earthside office and call it that if you can breathe the air."

"And not fall flat in an oof from the gravity for at least half an hour, and not hope the *whole* year around you have no brass monkey ancestors." Van Rijn's nod sent the black ringlets swirling around his shoulders.

"I generally got assigned to places where the brass monkeys melted," Harry complained.

"Well, Cain isn't too bad in the low latitudes," Per said. His face relaxed and his hands came alive, in quick gestures that reminded me of his mother. "It's about Earth size, average orbital radius a little over one A.U. Denser atmosphere, though, by around fifteen per cent, which makes for more greenhouse effect. Twenty-hour rotation period; no moons. Thirty-two degrees of axial tilt, which does rather complicate the seasons. But we were at fifteen-forty north, in fairly low hills, and it was summer. A nearby pool was frozen every morning, and snowbanks remained on the slopes—but really, not bad for the planet of a G9 star."

"Did Brander name it Cain?" I asked.

"Yes. I don't know why. But it turned out appropriate. Too appropriate." Again the bleakness. Manuel took his captain's empty glass and glided off, to return in a moment with it filled. Per drank hurriedly.

"Always there is trouble," van Rijn said. "You will learn."

"But the mission was going so well!" Per protested. "Even the language and the data seemed to…to flow into my head on the voyage out. In fact, the whole crew learned easily." He turned to me. "There were twenty of us, on the *Miriam Knight*. She's a real beauty, Cheland class transport, built for speed rather than capacity, you know. More wasn't needed, when we were only supposed to erect the first post and get the idea of regular trade across to the autochthones. We had the usual line of goods, fabrics, tools, weapons, household stuff like scissors and meat grinders. Not much ornament, because Brander's xenologists hadn't been able to work out any consistent pattern for it. Individual Cainites seemed to dress and decorate themselves any way they pleased. In the Ulash area, at least, which, of course, was the only one we had any details on."

"And few there," Harry murmured. "Also as usual."

"Agriculture?" I inquired.

"Some primitive cultivation," Per said. "Small plots scratched out of the forest, tended by the Lugals. In Ulash a little metallurgy has begun, copper, gold, silver, but even they are essentially neolithic. And essentially hunters—the Yildivans, that is, along with such Lugals as they employ to help. The food supply is mainly game. In fact, the better part of what farming is done is to supply fabric."

"What do they look like, these people?"

"I've a picture here." Per reached in his tunic and handed me a photograph. "That's old Shivaru. Early in our acquaintance. He was probably scared of the camera but he wouldn't admit it. You'll notice the Lugal he has with him is frankly in a blue funk."

I studied the image with an interest that grew. The background was harsh plutonic hillside, where grass of a pale yellowish turquoise grew between dark boulders. But on the right I glimpsed a densely wooded valley. The sky overhead was wan, and the orange sunlight distorted colors.

Shivaru stood very straight and stiff, glaring into the lens. He was about two meters tall, Per said, his body build much like that of a long-legged, deep chested man. Tawny, spotted fur covered him to the end of an elegant tail. The head was less anthropoid: a black ruff on top, slit-pupilled green eyes, round mobile ears, flat nose that looked feline even to the cilia around it, full-lipped mouth with protruding tushes at the corners, and jaw that tapered down to a V. He wore a sort of loincloth, gaudily dyed, and a necklace of raw semi-precious stones. His left hand clutched an obsidian-bladed battle ax and there was a steel trade knife in his belt.

"They're mammals, more or less," Per said, "though with any number of differences in anatomy and chemistry, as you'd expect. They don't sweat, however. There's a complicated system of exo- and endothermic reactions in the blood to regulate temperature."

"Sweating is not so common on cold terrestroids," van Rijn remarked. "Always you find analogs to something you met before, if you look long enough. Evolution makes parallels."

"And skew lines," I added. "Uh, Brander got some corpses to dissect, then?"

"Well, not any Yildivans," Per said. "But they sold him as many dead Lugals as he asked for, who're obviously of the same genus." He winced. "I hope they didn't kill the Lugals especially for that purpose."

My attention had gone to the creature that cowered behind Shivaru. It was a squat, short-shanked, brown-furred version of the other Cainite. Forehead and chin were poorly developed and the muzzle had not yet become a nose. The being was nude except for a heavy pack, a quiver of arrows, a bow and two spears, piled on its muscular back. I could see that the skin there was rubbed naked and calloused by such burdens. "This is a Lugal?" I pointed.

"Yes. You see, there are two related species on the planet, one further along in evolution than the other. As if Australopithecus had survived till today on Earth. The Yildivans have made slaves of the Lugals—certainly in Ulash, and as far as we could find out by spot checks, everywhere on Cain."

"Pretty roughly treated, aren't they, the poor devils?" Harry said. "*I* wouldn't trust a slave with weapons."

"But Lugals are completely trustworthy," Per said. "Like dogs. They do the hard, monotonous work. The Yildivans—male and female—are the hunters, artists, magicians, everything that matters. That is, what culture exists is Yildivan." He scowled into his drink. "Though I'm not sure how meaningful 'culture' is in this connection."

"How so?" Van Rijn lifted brows far above his small black eyes.

"Well...they, the Yildivans, haven't anything like a nation, a tribe, any sort of community. Family groups split up when the cubs are old enough to fend for themselves. A young male establishes himself somewhere, chases off all comers, and eventually one or more young females come join him. Their Lugals tag along, naturally—like dogs again. As near as I could learn, such families have only the most casual contact. Occasional barter, occasional temporary gangs formed to hunt extra-large animals, occasional clashes between individuals, and that's about it."

"But hold on," I objected. "Intelligent races need more. Something to be the carrier of tradition, something to stimulate the evolution of brain, a way for individuals to communicate ideas to each other. Else intelligence hasn't got any biological function."

"I fretted over that, too," Per said. "Had long talks with Shivaru, Fereghir, and others who drifted into camp whenever they felt like it. We really tried hard to understand each other. They were as curious about us as we about them, and as quick to see the mutual advantage in trade relations. But what a job! A whole different planet—two or three billion years of separate evolution—and we had only pidgin Ulash to start with, the limited vocabulary Brander's people had gotten. We couldn't go far into the subtleties. Especially when they, of course, took everything about their own way of life for granted.

"Toward the end, though, I began to get a glimmering. It turns out that in spite of their oafish appearance, the Lugals are not stupid. Maybe even as bright as their masters, in a different fashion; at any rate, not too far behind them. And…in each of these family groups, these patriarchal settlements in a cave or hut, way off in the forest, there are several times as many Lugals as Yildivans. Every member of the family, even the kids, has a number of slaves. Thus you may not get Yildivan clans or tribes, but you do get the numerical equivalent among the Lugals.

"Then the Lugals are sent on errands to other Yildivan preserves, with messages or barter goods or whatever, and bring back news. And they get traded around; the Yildivans breed them deliberately, with a shrewd practical grasp of genetics. Apparently, too, the Lugals are often allowed to wander off by themselves when there's no work for them to do—much as we let our dogs run loose—and hold powwows of their own.

"You mustn't think of them as being mistreated. They are, by our standards, but Cain is a brutal place and Yildivans don't exactly have an easy life either. An intelligent Lugal is valued. He's made straw boss over the others, teaches the Yildivan young special skills and songs and such, is sometimes even asked by his owner what he thinks ought to be done in a given situation. Some families let him eat and sleep in their own dwelling, I'm told. And remember, his loyalty is strictly to the masters. What they may do to other Lugals is nothing to him. He'll gladly help cull the weaklings, punish the lazy, anything.

"So, to get to the point, I think that's your answer. The Yildivans do have a community life, a larger society—but indirectly, through their Lugals. The Yildivans are the creators and innovators, the Lugals the communicators and preservers. I daresay the relationship has existed for so long a time that the biological evolution of both species has been conditioned by it."

"You speak rather well of them," said Harry grimly, "considering what they did to you."

"But they were very decent people at first." I could hear in Per's voice how hurt he was by that which had happened. "Proud as Satan, callous, but not cruel. Honest and generous. They brought gifts whenever they arrived, with no thought of payment. Two or three offered to assign us Lugal laborers. That wasn't necessary or feasible when we had machinery along, but they didn't realize it then. When they did, they were quick to grasp the idea, and mightily impressed. I think. Hard to tell, because they couldn't or wouldn't admit anyone else might be superior to them. That is, each individual thought of himself as being as good as anyone else anywhere in the world. But they seemed to regard us as their equals. I didn't try to explain where we were really from. 'Another country' looked sufficient for practical purposes.

"Shivaru was especially interested in us. He was middle-aged, most of his children grown and moved away. Wealthy in local terms, progressive—he was experimenting with ranching as a supplement to hunting—and his advice was much sought after by the others. I took him for a ride in a flitter and he was happy and excited as any child; brought his three mates along next time so they could enjoy it, too. We went hunting together occasionally. Lord, you should have seen him run down those great horned beasts, leap on their backs and brain them with one blow of that tremendous ax! Then his Lugals would butcher the game and carry it home to camp. The meat tasted good, believe me. Cainite biochemistry lacks some of our vitamins, but otherwise a human can get along all right there.

"Mainly, though, I remember how we'd talk. I suppose it's old hat to you freemen, but I had never before spent hour after hour with another being, both of us at work trying to build up a vocabulary and an understanding, both getting such a charge out of it that we'd forget even to eat until Manuel or Cherkez—that was his chief Lugal, a gnarly, droll old fellow, made me think of the friendly gnomes in my fairy tale books when I was a youngster—until one of them would tell us. Sometimes my mind wandered off and I'd come back to earth realizing that I'd just sat there admiring his beauty. Yildivans are as graceful as cats, as pleasing in shape as a good gun. And as deadly, when they want to be. I found that out!

"We had a favorite spot, in the lee of a cottage-sized boulder on the hillside above camp. The rock was warm against our backs; seemed even more so when I looked at that pale shrunken sun and my breath smoking out white across the purplish sky. Far, far overhead a bird of prey would wheel, then suddenly stoop—in the thick air I could hear the whistle through its wing feathers—and vanish into the treetops down in the valley. Those leaves had a million different shades of color, like an endless autumn.

"Shivaru squatted with his tail curled around his knees, ax on the ground beside him. Cherkez and one or two other Lugals hunkered at a respectful distance. Their eyes never left their Yildivan. Sometimes Manuel joined us, when he wasn't busy bossing some phase of construction. Remember, Manuel? You really shouldn't have kept so quiet."

"Silence was fitting, Captain," said the Nueva Mexican.

"Well," Per said, "Shivaru's deep voice would go on and on. He was full of plans for the future. No question of a trade treaty—no organization for us to make a treaty with—but he foresaw his people bringing us what we wanted in exchange for what we offered. And he was bright enough to see how the existence of a central mart like this, a common meeting ground, would affect them. More joint undertakings would be started. The idea of close co-operation would take root. He looked forward to that, within the rather narrow limits he could conceive. For instance, many Yildivans working together could take real advantage of the annual spawning run up the Mukushyat River. Big canoes could venture across a strait he knew of, to open fresh hunting grounds. That sort of thing.

"But then in a watchtick his ears would perk, his whiskers vibrate, he'd lean forward and start to ask about my own people. What sort of country did we come from? How was the game there? What were our mating and child-rearing practices? How did we ever produce such beautiful things? Oh, he had the whole cosmos to explore! Bit by bit, as my vocabulary grew, his questions got less practical and more abstract. So did mine, naturally. We were getting at each other's psychological foundations now, and were equally fascinated.

"I was not too surprised to learn that his culture had no religion. In fact, he was hard put to understand my questions about it. They practiced magic, but looked on it simply as a kind of technology. There was no animism, no equivalent of anthropomorphism. A Yildivan knew he was superior to any plant or animal. I think, but I'm not sure, that they had some vague concept of reincarnation. But it didn't interest them much, apparently, and the problem of origins hadn't occurred. Life was what you had, here and now. The world was a set of phenomena, to live with or master or be defeated by as the case might be.

"Shivaru asked me why I'd asked him about such a self-evident thing."

Per shook his head. His glance went down to the blanket around his lap and quickly back again. "That may have been my first mistake."

"No, Captain," said Manuel most gently. "How could you know they lacked souls?"

"Do they?" Per mumbled.

"We leave that to the theologians," van Rijn said. "They get paid to decide. Go on, boy."

I could see Per brace himself. "I tried to explain the idea of God," he said tonelessly. "I'm pretty sure I failed. Shivaru acted puzzled and... troubled. He left soon after. The Yildivans of Ulash use drums for long-range communication, have I mentioned? All that night I heard the drums mutter in the valley and echo from the cliffs. We had no visitors for a week. But Manuel, scouting around in the area, said he'd found tracks and traces. We were being watched.

"I was relieved, at first, when Shivaru returned. He had a couple of others with him, Fereghir and Tulitur, important males like himself. They came straight across the hill toward me. I was supervising the final touches on our timber-cutting system. We were to use local lumber for most of our construction, you see. Cut and trim in the woods with power beams, load the logs on a gravsled for the sawmill, then snake them directly through the induration vats to the site, where the foundations had now been laid. The air was full of whine and crash, boom and chug, in a wind that cut like a laser. I could hardly see our ship or our sealtents through dust, tinged bloody in the sun.

"They came to me, those three tall hunters, with a dozen armed Lugals hovering behind. Shivaru beckoned. 'Come,' he said. 'This is no place for a Yildivan.' I looked him in the eyes and they were filmed over, as if he'd put a glass mask between me and himself. Frankly, my skin prickled. I was unarmed—everybody was except Manuel, you know what Nueva Mexicans are—and I was afraid I'd precipitate something by going for a weapon. In fact, I even made a point of speaking Ulash as I ordered Tom Bullis to take over for me and told Manuel to come along uphill. If the autochthones had taken some notion into their heads that we were planning harm, it wouldn't do for them to hear us use a language they didn't know.

"Not another word was spoken till we were out of the dust and racket, at the old place by the boulder. It didn't feel warm today. Nothing did. 'I welcome you,' I said to the Yildivans, 'and bid you dine and sleep with us.' That's the polite formula when a visitor arrives. I didn't get the regular answer.

"Tulitur hefted the spear he carried and asked—not rudely, understand, but with a kind of shiver in the tone—'Why have you come to Ulash?'

" 'Why?' I stuttered. 'You know. To trade.'

" 'No, wait, Tulitur,' Shivaru interrupted. 'Your question is blind.' He turned to me. 'Were you sent?' he asked. And what I would like to ask you sometime, freemen, is whether it makes sense to call a voice black.

"I couldn't think of any way to hedge. Something bad gone awry, but I'd no feeblest notion what. A lie or a stall was as likely *a priori* to make matters worse as the truth. I saw the sunlight glisten along that dark axhead and felt most infernally glad to have Manuel beside me. Even so, the noise from the camp sounded faint and distant. Or was it only that the wind was whittering louder?

"I made myself stare back at him. 'You know we are here on behalf of others like us at home,' I said. The muscles tightened still more under his fur. Also…I can't read nonhuman expressions especially well. But Fereghir's lips were drawn off his teeth as if he confronted an enemy. Tulitur had grounded his spear point down. Brander's reports observed that a Yildivan never did that in the presence of a friend. Shivaru, though, was hardest to understand. I could have sworn he was grieved.

" 'Did God send you?' he asked.

"That put the dunce's cap on the whole lunatic business. I actually laughed, though I didn't feel at all funny. Inside my head it went click-click-click. I recognized a semantic point. Ulash draws some fine distinctions between various kinds of imperative. A father's command to his small child is entirely different—in word and concept both—from a command to another Yildivan beaten in a fight, which is different in turn from a command to a Lugal, and so on through a wider range than our psycholinguists have yet measured.

"Shivaru wanted to know if I was God's slave.

"Well, this was no time to explain the history of religion, which I'm none too clear about anyway. I just said no. I wasn't; God was a being in Whose existence some of us believed, but not everyone, and He had certainly not issued me any direct orders.

"That rocked them back! The breath hissed between Shivaru's fangs, his ruff bristled aloft and his tail whipped his legs. 'Then who did send you?' he nearly screamed. I could translate as well by: 'So who *is* your owner?'

"I heard a slither alongside me as Manuel loosened his gun in the holster. Behind the three Yildivans, the Lugals gripped their own axes and spears at the ready. You can imagine how carefully I picked my words. 'We are here freely,' I said, 'as part of an association.' Or maybe the word I had to use means 'fellowship'—I wasn't about to explain economics either. 'In our home country,' I said, 'none of us is a Lugal. You have seen our devices that work for us. We have no need of Lugalhood.'

" 'Ah-h-h,' Fereghir sighed, and poised his spear. Manuel's gun clanked free. 'I think best you go,' he said to them, 'before there is a fight. We do not wish to kill.'

"Brander had made a point of demonstrating guns, and so had we. No one stirred for a time that went on eternally, in that Fimbul wind. The hair stood straight on the Lugals. They were ready to rush us and die at a word. But it wasn't forthcoming. Finally the three Yildivans exchanged glances. Shivaru said in a dead voice, 'Let us consider this thing.' They turned on their heels and walked off through the long, whispering grass, their pack close around them.

"The drums beat for days and nights.

"We considered the thing ourselves at great length. What was the matter, anyhow? The Yildivans were primitive and unsophisticated by Commonwealth standards, but not stupid. Shivaru had not been surprised at the ways we differed from his people. For instance, the fact that we lived in communities instead of isolated families had only been one more oddity about us, intriguing rather than shocking. And, as I've told you, while large-scale co-operation among Yildivans wasn't common, it did happen once in a while; so what was wrong with our doing likewise?

"Igor Yuschenkoff, the captain of the *Miriam,* had a reasonable suggestion. 'If they have gotten the idea that we are slaves,' he said, 'then our masters must be still more powerful. Can they think we are preparing a base for invasion?'

" 'But I told them plainly we are not slaves,' I said.

" 'No doubt.' He laid a finger alongside his nose. 'Do they believe you?'

"You can imagine how I tossed awake in my sealtent. Should we haul gravs altogether, find a different area and start afresh? That would mean scrapping nearly everything we'd done. A whole new language to learn was the least of the problems. Nor would a move necessarily help. Scouting trips by flitter had indicated pretty strongly that the same basic pattern of life prevailed everywhere on Cain, as it did on Earth in the paleolithic era. If we'd run afoul, not of some local taboo, but of some fundamental—I just didn't know. I doubt if Manuel spent more than two hours a night in bed. He was too busy tightening our system of guards, drilling the men, prowling around to inspect and keep them alert.

"But our next contact was peaceful enough on the surface. One dawn a sentry roused me to say that a bunch of natives were here. Fog had arisen overnight, turned the world into wet gray smoke where you couldn't see three meters. As I came outside I heard the drip off a trac parked close by, the only clear sound in the muffledness. Tulitur and another Yildivan stood at the edge of camp, with about fifty male Lugals behind. Their fur sheened with water and their weapons were rime-coated. 'They must have traveled by night, Captain,' Manuel said, 'for the sake of cover. Surely others wait beyond view.' He led a squad with me.

"I made the Yildivans welcome, ritually, as if nothing had happened. I didn't get any ritual back. Tulitur said only, 'We are to trade. For your goods we will return those furs and plants you desire.'

"That was rather jumping the gun, with our post still less than half built. But I couldn't refuse what might be an olive branch. 'That is well,' I said. 'Come, let us eat while we talk about it.' Clever move, I thought. Accepting someone's food puts you under the same sort of obligation in Ulash that it used to on Earth.

"Tulitur and his companion—Bokzahan, I remember the name now—didn't offer thanks, but they did come into the ship and sit at the mess table. I figured this would be more ceremonious and impressive than a tent; also, it was out of that raw cold. I ordered stuff like bacon and eggs that the Cainites were known to like. They got right to business. 'How much will you trade to us?'

" 'That depends on what you want, and on what you have to give in exchange,' I said, to match their curtness.

" 'We have brought nothing with us,' Bokzahan said, 'for we knew not if you would be willing to bargain.'

" 'Why should I not be?' I answered. 'That is what I came for. There is no strife between us.' And I shot at him: 'Is there?'

"None of those ice-green eyes wavered. 'No,' Tulitur said, 'there is not. Accordingly, we wish to buy guns.'

" 'Such things we may not sell,' I answered. Best not to add that policy allowed us to as soon as we felt reasonably sure no harm would result. 'However, we have knives to exchange, as well as many useful tools.'

"They sulked a bit, but didn't argue. Instead, they went right to work, haggling over terms. They wanted as much of everything as we'd part with, and really didn't try to bargain the price down far. Only they wanted the stuff on credit. They needed it now, they said, and it'd take time to gather the goods for payment.

"That put me in an obvious pickle. On the one hand, the Yildivans had always acted honorably and, as far as I could check, always spoken truth. Nor did I want to antagonize them. On the other hand—but you can fill that in for yourself. I flatter myself I gave them a diplomatic answer. We did not for an instant doubt their good intentions, I said. We knew the Yildivans were fine chaps. But accidents could happen, and if so, we'd be out of pocket by a galactic sum.

"Tulitur slapped the table and snorted, 'Such fears might have been expected. Very well, we shall leave our Lugals here until payment is complete. Their value is great. But then you must carry the goods where we want them.'

"I decided that on those terms they could have half the agreed amount right away."

Per fell silent and gnawed his lip. Harry leaned over to pat his hand. Van Rijn growled, "*Ja,* by damn, no one can foretell everything that goes wrong, only be sure that some bloody-beplastered thing will. You did hokay, boy…Abdul, more drink, you suppose maybe this is Mars?"

Per sighed. "We loaded the stuff on a gravsled," he went on. "Manuel accompanied in an armed flitter, as a precaution. But nothing happened. Fifty kilometers or so from camp, the Yildivans told our men to land near a river. They had canoes drawn onto the bank there, with a few other Yildivans standing by. Clearly they intended to float the goods further by themselves, and Manuel called me to see if I had any objections. 'No,' I said. 'What difference does it make? They must want to keep the destination secret. They don't trust us any longer.' Behind him, in the screen, I saw Bokzahan watching. Our communicators had fascinated visitors before now. But this time, was there some equivalent of a sneer on his face?

"I was busy arranging quarters and rations for the Lugals, though. And a guard or two, nothing obtrusive. Not that I really expected trouble. I'd heard their masters say, 'Remain here and do as the *Erziran* direct until we come for you.' But nevertheless it felt queasy, having that pack of dog-beings in camp.

"They settled down in their animal fashion. When the drums began again that night they got restless, shifted around in the pavilion we'd turned over to them and mewled in a language Brander hadn't recorded. But they were quite meek next morning. One of them even asked if they couldn't help in our work. I had to laugh at the thought of a Lugal behind the controls of a five hundred kilowatt trac, and told him no, thanks, they need only loaf and watch us. They were good at loafing.

"A few times, in the next three days, I tried to get them into conversation. But nothing came of that. They'd answer me, not in the deferential style they used to a Yildivan but not insolently either. However, the answers were meaningless. 'Where do you live?' I would say. 'In the forest yonder,' the slave replied, staring at his toes. 'What sort of tasks do you have to do at home?' 'That which my Yildivan sets for me.' I gave up.

"Yet they weren't stupid. They had some sort of game they played, involving figures drawn in the dirt, that I never did unravel. Each sundown they formed ranks and crooned, an eerie minor-key chant, with improvisations that sometimes sent a chill along my nerves. Mostly they slept, or sat and stared at nothing, but once in a while several would squat in a circle, arms around their neighbors' shoulders, and whisper together.

"Well…I'm making the story too long. We were attacked shortly before dawn of the fourth day.

"Afterward I learned that something like a hundred male Yildivans were in that party, and heaven knows how many Lugals. They'd rendezvoused from everywhere in that tremendous territory called Ulash, called by the drums and, probably, by messengers who'd run day and night through the woods. Our pickets were known to their scouts, and they laid a hurricane of arrows over those spots, while the bulk of them rushed in between. Otherwise I can't tell you much. I was a casualty." Per grimaced. "What a fool thing to happen. On my first command!"

"Go on," Harry urged. "You haven't told me any details."

"There aren't many," Per shrugged. "The first screams and roars slammed me awake. I threw on a jacket and stuffed feet into boots while my free hand buckled on a gun belt. By then the sirens were in full cry. Even so, I heard a blaster beam sizzle past my tent.

"I stumbled out into the compound. Everything was one black, boiling hell-kettle. Blasters flashed and flashed, sirens howled and voices cried battle. The cold stabbed at me. Starlight sheened on snowbanks and hoarfrost over the hills. I had an instant to think how bright and many the stars were, out there and not giving a curse.

"Then Yuschenkoff switched on the floodlamps in the *Miriam*'s turret. Suddenly an artificial sun stood overhead, too bright for us to look at. What must it have been to the Cainites? Blue-white incandescence, I suppose. They swarmed among our tents and machines, tall leopard-furred hunters, squat brown gnomes, axes, clubs, spears, bows, slings, our own daggers in their hands. I saw only one man—sprawled on the earth, gun still between his fingers, head a broken horror.

"I put the command mike to my mouth—always wore it on my wrist as per doctrine—and bawled out orders as I pelted toward the ship. We had the atom itself to fight for us, but we were twenty, no, nineteen or less, against Ulash.

"Now our dispositions were planned for defense. Two men slept in the ship, the others in sealtents ringed around her. The half dozen on guard duty had been cut off, but the rest had the ship for an impregnable retreat. What we must do, though, was rally to the rescue of those guards, and quick. If it wasn't too late.

"I saw the boys emerge from their strong point under the landing jacks. Even now I remember how Zerkowsky hadn't fastened his parka, and in what a low-comedy way it flapped around his bottom. He didn't use pajamas. You notice the smallest things at such times, don't you? The Cainites had begun to mill about, dazzled by the light. They hadn't expected that, nor the siren, which is a terrifying thing to hear at close range. Quite a few of them were already strewn dead or dying.

"Then—but all I knew personally was a tide that bellowed and yelped and clawed. It rolled over me from behind. I went down under their legs. They pounded across me and left me in the grip of a Lugal. He lay on my chest and went for my throat with teeth and hands. Judas, but that creature was strong! Centimeter by centimeter he closed in against my pushing and gouging. Suddenly another one got into the act. Must have snatched a club from some fallen Cainite and attacked whatever part of me was handiest, which happened to be my left shin. It's nothing but pain and rage after that, till the blessed darkness came.

"The fact was, of course, that our Lugal hostages had overrun their guards and broken free. I might have expected as much. Even without specific orders, they wouldn't have stood idle while their masters fought. But doubtless they'd been given advance commands. Tulitur and Bokzahan diddled us very nicely. First they got a big consignment of our trade goods, free, and then they planted reinforcements for themselves right in our compound.

"Even so, the scheme didn't work. The Yildivans hadn't really comprehended our power. How could they have? Manuel himself dropped the two Lugals who were killing me. He needed exactly two shots for that. Our boys swept a ring of fire, and the enemy melted away.

"But they'd hurt us badly. When I came to, I was in the *Miriam*'s sickbay. Manuel hovered over me like an anxious raven. 'How'd we do?' I think I said.

" 'You should rest, señor,' he said, 'and God forgive me that I made the doctor rouse you with drugs. But we must have your decision quickly. Several men are wounded. Two are dead. Three are missing. The enemy is back in the wilderness, I believe with prisoners.'

"He lifted me into a carrier and took me outside. I felt no physical pain, but was lightheaded and half crazy. You know how it is when you're filled to the cap with stimulol. Manuel told me straight out that my legbone was pretty well pulverized, but that didn't seem to matter at the time… What do I mean, 'seem'? Of course it didn't! Gower and Muramoto were dead. Bullis, Cheng, and Zerkowsky were gone.

"The camp was unnaturally quiet under the orange sun. My men had policed the grounds while I was unconscious. Enemy corpses were laid out in a row. Twenty-three Yildivans—that number's going to haunt me for the rest of my life—and I'm not sure how many Lugals, a hundred perhaps. I had Manuel push me along while I peered into face after still, bloody face. But I didn't recognize any.

"Our own prisoners were packed together in our main basement excavation. A couple of hundred Lugals, but only two wounded Yildivans. The rest who were hurt had been carried off by their friends. With so much construction and big machines standing around for cover, that hadn't been too hard to do. Manuel explained that he'd stopped the attack of the hostages with stun beams. Much the best weapon. You can't prevent a Lugal fighting for his master with a mere threat to kill him.

"In a corner of the pit, glaring up at the armed men above, were the Yildivans. One I didn't know. He had a nasty blaster burn, and our medics had given him sedation after patching it, so he was pretty much out of the picture anyway. But I recognized the other, who was intact. A stun beam had taken him. It was Kochihir, an adult son of Shivaru, who'd visited us like his father a time or two.

"We stared at each other for a space, he and I. Finally, 'Why?' I asked him. 'Why have you done this?' Each word puffed white out of my mouth and the wind shredded it.

" 'Because they are traitors, murderers, and thieves by nature, that's why,' Yuschenkoff said, also in Ulash. Brander's team had naturally been careful to find out whether there were words corresponding to concepts of honor and the reverse. I don't imagine the League will ever forget the Darborian Semantics!

"Yuschenkoff spat at Kochihir. 'Now we shall hunt down your breed like the animals they are,' he said. Gower had been his brother-in-law.

" 'No,' I said at once, in Ulash, because such a growl had risen from the Lugals that any insane thing might have happened next. 'Speak thus no more.' Yuschenkoff shut his mouth and a kind of ripple went among those packed, hairy bodies, like wind dying out on an ocean. 'But, Kochihir,' I said, 'your father was my good friend. Or so I believed. In what wise have we offended him and his people?'

"He raised his ruff, the tail lashed his ankles, and he snarled, 'You must go and never come back. Else we shall harry you in the forests, roll the hillsides down on you, stampede horned beasts through your camps, poison the wells and burn the grass about your feet. Go, and do not dare return!'

"My own temper flared—which made my head spin and throb, as if with fever—and I said, 'We shall certainly not go unless our captive friends are returned to us. There are drums in camp that your father gave me before he betrayed us. Call your folk on those, Kochihir, and tell them to bring back our folk. After that, perhaps we can talk. Never before.'

"He fleered at me without replying.

"I beckoned to Manuel. 'No sense in stalling unnecessarily,' I said. 'We'll organize a tight defense here. Won't get taken by surprise twice. But we've got to rescue those men. Send flitters aloft to search for them. The war party can't have gone far.'

"You can best tell how you argued with me, Manuel. You said an airlift was an utter waste of energy which was badly needed elsewhere. Didn't you?"

The Nueva Mexican looked embarrassed. "I did not wish to contradict my captain," he said. His oddly delicate fingers twisted together in his lap as he stared out into the night that had fallen. "But indeed I thought that aerial scouts would never find anyone in so many, many hectares of hill and ravine, water and woods. They could have dispersed, those devils. Surely, even if they traveled away in company, they would not be in such a clump that infrared detectors could see them through the forest roof. Yet I did not like to contradict my captain."

"Oh, you did, you," Per said. A corner of his mouth bent upward. "I was quite daft by then. Shouted and stormed at you, eh? Told you to jolly well obey orders and get those flitters in motion. You saluted and started off, and I called you back. You mustn't go in person. Too valuable here. Yes, that meant I was keeping back the one man with enough wilderness experience that he might have stood a chance of identifying spoor, even from above. But my brain was spinning down and down the sides of a maelstrom. 'See what you can do to make this furry individual co-operate,' I said."

"It pained me a little that my captain should appoint me his torturer," Manuel confessed mildly. "Although from time to time, on various planets, when there was great need— No matter."

"I'd some notion of breaking down morale among our prisoners," Per said. "In retrospect, I see that it wouldn't have made any difference if they had co-operated, at least to the extent of drumming for us. The Cainites don't have our kind of group solidarity. If Kochihir and his buddy came to grief at our hands, that was their hard luck. But Shivaru and some of the others had read our psychology shrewdly enough to know what a hold on us their three prisoners gave.

"I looked down at Kochihir. His teeth gleamed back. He hadn't missed a syllable or a gesture, and even if he didn't know any Anglic, he must have understood almost exactly what was going on. By now I was slurring my words as if drunk. So, also like a drunk, I picked them with uncommon care. 'Kochihir,' I said, 'I have commanded our fliers out to hunt down your people and fetch our own whom they have captured. Can a Yildivan outrun a flying machine? Can he fight when its guns flame at him from above? Can he hide from its eyes that see from end to end of the horizon? Your kinfolk will dearly pay if they do not return our men of their own accord.

" 'Take the drums, Kochihir, and tell them so. If you do not, it will cost *you* dearly. I have commanded my man here to do whatever may be needful to break your will.'

"Oh, that was a vicious speech. But Gower and Muramoto had been my friends. Bullis, Cheng, and Zerkowsky still were, if they lived. And I was on the point of passing out. I did, actually, on the way back to the ship. I heard Doc Leblanc mutter something about how could he be expected to treat a patient whose system was abused with enough drugs to bloat a camel, and then the words kind of trailed off in a long gibber that went on and on, rising and falling until I thought I'd been turned into an electron and was trapped in an oscilloscope...and the darkness turned green and...and they tell me I was unconscious for fifty hours.

"From there on it's Manuel's story."

At this stage, Per was croaking. As he sank back in his lounger, I saw how white he had become. One hand picked at his blanket, and the vermouth slopped when he raised his glass. Harry watched him, with a helpless anger that smoldered at van Rijn. The merchant said, "There, there, so soon after his operation and I make him lecture us, ha? But shortly comes dinner, no better medicine than a real *rijstaffel,* and so soon after that he can walk about, he comes to my place in Djakarta for a nice old-fashioned orgy."

"Oh, hellfire!" the boy exploded in a whisper. "Why're you trying to make me feel good? I ruined the whole show!"

"Whoa, son," I ventured to suggest. "You were in good spirits half an hour ago, and half an hour from now you'll be the same. It's only that reliving the bad moments is more punishment that Jehovah would inflict. I've been there, too." Blindly, the blue gaze sought mine. "Look, Per," I said, "if Freeman van Rijn thought you'd botched a mission through your own fault, you wouldn't be lapping his booze tonight. You'd be selling meat to the cannibals."

A ghost of a grin rewarded me.

"Well, Don Manuel," van Rijn said, "now we hear from you, *nie?*"

"By your favor, señor, I am no Don," the Nueva Mexican said, courteously, academically, and not in the least humbly. "My father was a huntsman in the Sierra de los Bosques Secos, and I traveled as a mercenary with Rogers' Rovers, becoming sergeant before I left them for your service. No more." He hesitated. "Nor is there much I can relate of the happenings on Cain."

"Don't make foolishness," van Rijn said, finished his third or fourth liter of beer since I arrived and signaled for more. My own glass had been kept filled too, so much so that the stars and the city lights had begun to dance in the dark outside. I stuffed my pipe to help me ease off. "I have read the official reports from your expeditioning," van Rijn continued. "They are scum-dreary. I need details—the little things nobody thinks to record—I need to make a planet real for me before this cracked old pot of mine can maybe find a pattern. For it is my experience of many other planets, where I, even I, Nicholas van Rijn, got my nose rubbed in the dirt—which, ho, ho! takes a lot of dirt—it is on that I draw. Evolutions have parallels, but also skews, like somebody said tonight. Which lines is Cain's evolution parallel to? Talk, Ensign Gomez y Palomares. Brag. Pop jokes, sing songs, balance a chair on your head if you want—but talk!"

The brown man sat still a minute. His eyes were steady on us, save when they moved to Per and back.

"As the señor wishes," he began. Throughout his tone was level, but the accent could not help singing.

"When they bore my captain away I stood in thought, until Igor Yuschenkoff said, 'Well, who is to take the flitters?'

" 'None,' I said.

" 'But we have orders,' he said.

" 'The captain was hurt and shaken. We should not have roused him,' I answered, and asked of the men who stood near: 'Is this not so?'

"They agreed, after small argument. I leaned over the edge of the pit and asked Kochihir if he would beat the drums for us. 'No,' he said, 'whatever you do.'

" 'I shall do nothing, yet,' I said. 'We will bring you food presently.' And that was done. For the rest of the short day I wandered about among the snows that lay in patches on the grass. Ay, this was a stark land, where it swooped down into the valley and then rose again at the end of sight in saw-toothed purple ranges. I thought of home and of one Dolores whom I had known, a long time ago. The men did no work, they huddled over their weapons, saying little, and toward evening the breath began to freeze on their parka hoods.

"One by one I spoke to them and chose them for those tasks I had in mind. They were all good men with their hands, but few had been hunters save in sport. I myself could not trail the Cainites far, because they had crossed a broad reach of naked rock on their way downward and once in the forest covered their tracks. But Hamud ibn Rashid and Jacques Ngolo had been woodsmen in their day. We prepared what we needed. Then I entered the ship and looked on my captain—how still he lay!

"I ate lightly and slept briefly. Darkness had fallen when I returned to the pit. The four men we had on guard stood like deeper shadows against the stars which crowd that sky. 'Go now,' I said, and took out my own blaster. Their footfalls crunched away.

"The shapes that clotted the blackness of the pit stirred and mumbled. A voice hissed upward, 'Ohé, you are back. To torment me?' Those Cainites have eyes that see in the night like owls. I had thought before that they snickered within themselves when they watched us blunder about after sunset.

" 'No,' I said, 'I am only taking my turn to guard you.'

" 'You alone?' he scoffed.

" 'And this.' I slapped the blaster against my thigh.

"He fell silent. The cold gnawed deeper into me. I do not think the Cainites felt it much. As the stars wheeled slowly overhead, I began to despair of my plan. Whispers went among the captives, but otherwise I stood in a world where sound was frozen dead.

"When the thing happened, it went with devil's haste. The Lugals had been shifting about a while, as if restless. Suddenly they were upon me. One had stood on another's shoulders and leaped. To death, as they thought—but my shot missed, a quick flare and an amazed gasp from him that he was still alive. Had I not missed, several would have died to bring me down.

"As it was, two fell upon me. I went under, breaking hands loose from my throat with a judo release but held writhing by their mass. Hard fists beat me on head and belly. A palm over my mouth muffled my yells. Meanwhile the prisoners helped themselves out and fled.

"Finally I worked a leg free and gave one of them my knee. He rolled off with pain rattling in his throat. I twisted about on top of the other and struck him below the skull with the blade of my hand. When he went limp, I sprang up and shouted.

"Siren and floodlights came to life. The men swarmed from ship and tents. 'Back!' I cried. 'Not into the dark!' Many Lugals had not yet escaped, and those retreated snarling to the far side of the pit as our troop arrived. With their bodies they covered the wounded Yildivan from the guns. But we only fired, futilely, after those who were gone from sight.

"Guards posted themselves around the cellar. I scrabbled over the earth, seeking my blaster. It was gone. Someone had snatched it up: if not Kochihir, then a Lugal who would soon give it to him. Jacques Ngolo came to me and saw. 'This is bad,' he said.

" 'An evil turn of luck,' I admitted, 'but we must proceed anyhow.' I rose and stripped off my parka. Below were the helmet and spacesuit torso which had protected me in the fight. I threw them down, for they would only hinder me now, and put the parka back on. Hamud ibn Rashid joined us. He had my pack and gear and another blaster for me. I took them, and we three started our pursuit.

"By the mercy of God, we had never found occasion to demonstrate night-seeing goggles here. They made the world clear, though with a sheen over it like dreams. Ngolo's infrared tracker was our compass, the needle trembling toward the mass of Cainites that loped ahead of us. We saw them for a while, too, as they crossed the bare hillside, in and out among tumbled boulders; but we kept ourselves low lest they see us against the sky. The grass was rough in my face when I went all-fours, and the earth sucked heat out through boots and gloves. Somewhere a hunted beast screamed.

"We were panting by the time we reached the edge of trees. Yet in under their shadows we must go, before the Cainites fled further than the compass would reach. Already it flickered, with so many dark trunks and so much brake to screen off radiation. But thus far the enemy had not stopped to hide his trail. I moved through the underbrush more carefully than him—legs brought forward to part the stems that my hands then guided to either side of my body—reading the book of trampled bush and snapped branch.

"After an hour we were well down in the valley. Tall trees gloomed everywhere about, the sky was hidden and I must tune up the photomultiplier unit in my goggles. Now the book began to close. The Cainites were moving at a natural pace, confident of their escape, and even without special effort they left little spoor. And since they were now less frantic and more alert, we must follow so far behind that infrared detection was of no further use.

"At last we came to a meadow, whose beaten grass showed that they had paused here a while. And that was seen which I feared. The party had broken into three or four, each bound a different way. 'Which do we choose?' Ngolo asked.

" 'Three of us can follow three of them,' I said.

" *'Bismillah!'* Hamud grunted. 'Blaster or no. I would not care to face such a band alone. But what must be, must be.'

"We took so much time to ponder what clues the forest gave that the east was gray before we parted. Plainly, the Lugals had gone toward their masters' homes, while Kochihir's own slaves had accompanied him. And Kochihir was the one we desired. I could only guess that the largest party was his, because most likely the first break had been made under his orders by his own Lugals, whose capabilities he knew. That path I chose for myself. Hamud and Ngolo wanted it too, but I used my rank to seize the honor, that folk on Nueva Mexico might never say a Gomez lacked courage.

"So great a distance was now between that there was no reason not to use our radios to talk with each other and with the men in camp. That was often consoling, in the long time which was upon me. For it was slow, slow, tracing those woods-wily hunters through their own land. I do not believe I could have done it, had they been only Yildivans and such Lugals as are regularly used in the chase. But plain to see, the attack had been strengthened by calling other Lugals from fields and mines and household tasks, and those were less adept.

"Late in the morning, Ngolo called. 'My gang just reached a cave and a set of lean-tos,' he said. 'I sit in a tree and watch them met by some females and half-grown Yildivans. They shuffle off to their own shed. This is where they belong, I suppose, and they are not going farther. Shall I return to the meadow and pick up another trail?'

" 'No,' I said, 'it would be too cold by now. Backtrack to a spot out of view and have a flitter fetch you.'

"Some hours later, the heart leaped in my breast. For I came upon a tree charred by unmistakable blaster shots. Kochihir had been practicing.

"I called Hamud and asked where he was. 'On the bank of a river,' he said, 'casting about for the place where they crossed. That was a bitter stream to wade!'

" 'Go no further,' I said. 'My path is the right one. Have yourself taken back to camp.'

" 'What?' he asked. 'Shall we not join you now?'

" 'No,' I said. 'It is uncertain how near I am to the end. Perhaps so near that a flitter would be seen by them as it came down and alarm them. Stand by.' I confess it was a lonely order to give.

"A few times I stopped to eat and rest. But stimulants kept me going in a way that would have surprised my quarry who despised me. By evening his trail was again so fresh that I slacked my pace and went on with a snake's caution. Down here, after sunset, the air was not so cold as on the heights; yet every leaf glistened hoar in what starlight pierced through.

"Not much into the night, my own infrared detector began to register a source, stronger than living bodies could account for. I whispered the news into my radio and then ordered no more communication until further notice, lest we be overheard. Onward I slipped. The forest rustled and creaked about me, somewhere far off a heavy animal broke brush in panic flight, wings whirred overhead, yet *Santa María*, how silent and alone it was!

"Until I came to the edge of a small clearing.

"A fire burned there, throwing unrestful shadows on the wall of a big, windowless log cabin which nestled under the trees beyond. Two Yildivans leaned on their spears. Light glimmered from the smokehole in the roof.

"Most softly, I drew my stun gun. The bolt snicked twice, and they fell in heaps. At once I sped across the open ground, crouched in the shadow under that rough wall, and waited.

"But no one had heard. I glided to the doorway. Only a leather curtain blocked my view. I twitched it aside barely enough that I might peer within.

"The view was dimmed by smoke, but I could see that there was just one long room. It did not seem plain, so beautiful were the furs hung and draped everywhere about. A score or so of Yildivans, mostly grown males, squatted in a circle around the fire, which burned in a pit and picked their fierce flat countenances out of the dark. Also there were several Lugals hunched in a corner. I recognized old Cherkez among them, and was glad he had outlived the battle. The Lugals in Kochihir's party must have been sent to barracks. He himself was telling his father, Shivaru, of his escape.

"As yet the time was unripe for gladness, but I vowed to light many candles for the saints. Because this was as I had hoped: Kochihir had not gone to his own home, but sought an agreed rendezvous. Zerkowsky, Cheng, and Bullis were here. They sat in another corner at the far end of the room, coughing from the smoke, skins drawn around them to ward off the cold.

"Kochihir finished his account and looked at his father for approval. Shivaru's tail switched back and forth. 'Strange that they were so careless about you,' he said.

" 'They are like blind cubs,' Kochihir scoffed.

" 'I am not so sure,' the old Yildivan murmured. 'Great are their powers. And...we know what they did in the past.' Then suddenly he grew stiff, and his whisper struck out like a knife: 'Or did they do it? Tell me again, Kochihir, how the master ordered one thing and the rest did another.'

" 'No, now, that means nothing,' said a different Yildivan, scarred and grizzled. 'What we must devise is a use for these captives. You have thought they might trade our Lugals and Gumush, whom Kochihir says they still hold, for three of their own. But I say, Why should they? Let us instead place the bodies where the *Erziran* can find them, in such condition that they will be warned away.'

" 'Just so,' said Bokzahan, whom I now spied in the gloom. 'Tulitur and I proved they are weak and foolish.'

" 'First we should try to bargain,' said Shivaru. 'If that fails—' His fangs gleamed in the firelight.

" 'Make an example of one, then, before we talk,' Kochihir said angrily. 'They threatened the same for me.'

"A rumble went among them, as from a beast's cage in the zoo. I thought with terror of what might be done. For my captain has told you how no Yildivan is in authority over any other. Whatever his wishes, Shivaru could not stop them from doing what they would.

"I must decide my own course immediately. Blaster bolts could not destroy them all fast enough to keep them from hurling the weapons that lay to hand upon me—not unless I set the beam so wide that our men must also be killed. The stun gun was better, yet it would not overpower them either before I went down under axes and clubs. By standing to one side I could pen them within, for they had only the single door. But Bullis, Cheng, and Zerkowsky would remain hostages.

"What I did was doubtless stupid, for I am not my captain. I sneaked back to the edge of the woods and called the men in camp. 'Come as fast as may be,' I said, and left the radio going for them to home on. Then I circled about and found a tree overhanging the cabin. Up I went, and down again from a branch to the sod roof, and so to the smokehole. Goggles protected my eyes, but nostrils withered in the fumes that poured forth. I filled my lungs and leaned forward to see.

"Best would have been if they had gone to bed. Then I could have stunned them one by one as they slept, without risk. But they continued to sit about and quarrel over what to do with their captives. How hard those poor men tried to be brave, as that dreadful snarling broke around them, as slit eyes turned their way and hands went stroking across knives!

"The time felt long, but I had not completed the Rosary in my mind when thunder awoke. Our flitters came down the sky like hawks. The Yildivans roared. Two or three of them dashed out the door to see what was afoot. I dropped them with my stunner, but not before one had screamed, 'The *Erziran* are here!'

"My face went back to the smokehole. It was turmoil below. Kochihir screeched and pulled out his blaster. I fired but missed. Too many bodies in between, señores. There is no other excuse for me.

"I took the gun in my teeth, seized the edge of the smokehole, and swung myself as best I could before letting go. Thus I struck the dirt floor barely outside the firepit, rolled over and bounced erect. Cherkez leaped for my throat. I sent him reeling with a kick to the belly, took my gun and fired around me.

"Kochihir could not be seen in the mob which struggled from wall to wall. I fought my way toward the prisoners. Shivaru's ax whistled down. By the grace of God, I dodged it, twisted about and stunned him point blank. I squirmed between two others. A third got on my back. I snapped my head against his mouth and felt flesh give way. He let go. With my gun arm and my free hand I tossed a Lugal aside and saw Kochihir. He had reached the men. They shrank from him, too stupefied to fight. Hate was on his face, in his whole body, as he took unpracticed aim.

"He saw me at his sight's edge and spun. The blaster crashed, blinding in that murk. But I had dropped to one knee as I pulled trigger. The beam scorched my parka hood. He toppled. I pounced, got the blaster, and whirled to stand before our people.

"Bokzahan raised his ax and threw it. I blasted it in midair and then killed him. Otherwise I used the stunner. And in a minute or two more, the matter was finished. A grenade brought down the front wall of the cabin. The Cainites fell before a barrage of knockout beams. We left them to awaken and returned to camp."

Again silence grew upon us. Manuel asked if he might smoke, politely declined van Rijn's cigars and took a vicious-looking brown cigarette from his own case. That was a lovely, grotesque thing, wrought in silver on some planet I could not identify.

"Whoof!" van Rijn gusted. "But this is not the whole story, from what you have written. They came to see you before you left."

Per nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. A measure of strength had re-arisen in him. "We'd about finished our preparations when Shivaru himself arrived, with ten other Yildivans and their Lugals. They walked slowly into the compound, ruffs erect and tails held stiff, looking neither to right nor left. I guess they wouldn't have been surprised to be shot down. I ordered such of the boys as were covering them to holster guns, and went out on my carrier to say hello with due formality.

"Shivaru responded just as gravely. Then he got almost tongue-tied. He couldn't really apologize. Ulash doesn't have the phrases for it. He beckoned to Cherkez. 'You were good to release our people whom you held,' he said." Per chuckled. "Huh! What else were we supposed to do, keep feeding them? Cherkez gave him a leather bag. 'I bring a gift,' he told me, and pulled out Tulitur's head. 'We shall return as much of the goods he got from you as we can find,' he promised, 'and if you will give us time, we shall bring double payment for everything else.'

"I'm afraid that after so much blood had gone over the dam, I didn't find the present as gruesome as I ought. I only sputtered that we didn't require such tokens.

" 'But we do,' he said, 'to cleanse our honor.'

"I invited them to eat, but they declined. Shivaru made haste to explain that they didn't feel right about accepting our hospitality until their debt was paid off. I told them we were pulling out. Though that was obvious from the state of the camp, they still looked rather dismayed. So I told them we, or others like us, would be back, but first it was necessary to get our injured people home.

"Another mistake of mine. Because being reminded of what they'd done to us upset them so badly that they only mumbled when I tried to find out why they'd done it. I decided best not press that issue—the situation being delicate yet—and they left with relief branded on them.

"We should have stuck around a while, maybe, because we've got to know what the trouble was before committing more men and equipment to Cain. Else it's all too likely to flare up afresh. But between our being shorthanded, and having a couple of chaps who needed first-class medical treatment, I didn't think we could linger. All the way home we wondered and argued. What had gone wrong? And what, later, had gone right? We still don't know."

Van Rijn's eyes glittered at him. "What is your theory?" he demanded.

"Oh—" Per spread his hands. "Yuschenkoff's, more or less. They were afraid we were the spearhead of an invasion. When we acted reasonably decently—refraining from mistreatment of prisoners, thanks to Manuel, and using stunners rather than blasters in the rescue operation—they decided they were mistaken."

Manuel had not shifted a muscle in face or body, as far as I could see. But van Rijn's battleship prow of a nose swung toward him and the merchant laughed, "You have maybe a little different notion, ha? Come, spew it out."

"My place is not to contradict my captain," said the Nueva Mexican.

"So why you make fumblydiddles against orders, that day on Cain? When you know better, then you got a duty, by damn, to tell us where to stuff our heads."

"If the señor commands. But I am no learned man. I have no book knowledge of studies made on the psychonomy. It is only that...that I think I know those Yildivans. They seem not so unlike men of the barranca country on my home world, and again among the Rovers.

"They live very near death, their whole lives. Courage and skill in fighting, those are what they most need to survive, and so are what they most treasure. They thought, seeing us use machines and weapons that kill from afar, seeing us blinded by night and most of us clumsy in the woods, hearing us talk about what our life is like at home—they thought we lacked *cojones*. So they scorned us. They owed us nothing, since we were spiritless and could never understand their own spirit. We were only fit to be the prey, first of their wits and then of their weapons." Manuel's shoulders drew straight. His voice belled out so that I jumped in my seat. "When they found how terrible men are, that they themselves are the weak ones, we changed in their eyes from peasants to kings!"

Van Rijn sucked noisily on his cigar. "Any other shipboard notions?" he asked.

"No, sir, those were our two schools of thought," Per said.

Van Rijn guflawed. "So! Take comfort, freemen. No need for angelometrics on pinheads. Relax and drink. You are both wrong."

"I *beg* your pardon," Harry rapped. "You were not there, may I say."

"No, not in the flesh." Van Rijn slapped his paunch. "Too much flesh for that. But tonight I have been on Cain up here, in this old brain, and it is rusty and afloat in alcohol but it has stored away more information about the universe than maybe the universe gets credit for holding. I see now what the parallels are. Xanadu, Dunbar, Tametha, Disaster Landing...oh, the analog is never exact and on Cain the thing I am thinking of has gone far and far...but still I see the pattern, and what happened makes sense.

"Not that we have to have an analog. You gave us so many clues here that I could solve the puzzle by logic alone. But analogs help, and also they show my conclusion is not only correct but possible."

Van Rijn paused. He was so blatantly waiting to be coaxed that Harry and I made a long performance out of refreshing our drinks. Van Rijn turned purple, wheezed a while, decided to keep his temper for a better occasion, and chortled.

"Hokay, you win," he said. "I tell you short and fast, because very soon we eat if the cook has not fallen in the curry. Later you can study the formal psychologics.

"The key to this problem is the Lugals. You have been calling them slaves, and there is your mistake, They are not. They are domestic animals."

Per sat bolt upright. "Can't be!" he exclaimed. "Sir. I mean, they have language and—"

"*Ja, ja, ja*, for all I care they do mattress algebra in their heads. They are still tame animals. What is a slave, anyhows? A man who has got to do what another man says, willy-billy. Right? Harry said he would not trust a slave with weapons, and I would not either, because history is too pocked up with slave revolts and slaves running away and slaves dragging their feet and every such foolishness. But your big fierce expensive dogs, Harry, you trust them with their teeth, *nie?* When your kids was little and wet, you left them alone in rooms with a dog to keep watches. There is the difference. A slave may or may not obey. But a domestic animal has got to obey. His genes won't let him do anything different.

"Well, you yourselves figured the Yildivans had kept Lugals so long, breeding them for what traits they wanted, that this had changed the Lugal nature. Must be so. Otherwise the Lugals would be slaves, not animals, and could not always be trusted the way you saw they were. You also guessed the Yildivans themselves must have been affected, and this is very sleek thinking only you did not carry it far enough. Everything you tell about the Yildivans goes to prove, by nature they are *wild* animals.

"I mean wild, like tigers and buffalos. They have no genes for obediences, except to their parents when they are little. So long have they kept Lugals to do the dirty work—before they really became intelligent, I bet, like ants keeping aphids; for remember, you found no Lugals that was not kept—any gregarious-making genes in the Yildivans, any inborn will to be led, has gone foof. This must be so. Otherwise, from normal variation in ability, some form of Yildivan ranks would come to exist, *nie?*

"This pops your fear-of-invasion theory, Per Stenvik. With no concept of a tribe or army, they can't have any notions about conquest. And wild animals don't turn humble when they are beat, Manuel Gomez y Palomares, the way you imagine. A man with a superiority complexion may lick your boots when you prove you are his better; but an untamed carnivore hasn't got any such pride in the first place. He is plain and simple independent of you.

"Well, then, what did actual go on in their heads?

"Recapitalize. Humans land and settle down to deal. Yildivans have no experience of races outside their own planet. They naturally assume you think like them. In puncture of fact, I believe they could not possible imagine anything else, even if they was told. Your findings about their culture structure shows their half symbiosis with the Lugals is psychological too; they are specialized in the brains, not near so complicated as man.

"But as they get better acquaintanced, what do they see? People taking orders. How can this be? No Yildivan ever took orders, unless to save his life when an enemy stood over him with a sharp thing. Ah, ha! So some of the strangers is Lugal type. Pretty soon, I bet, old Shivaru decides all of you is Lugal except young Stenvik, because in the end all orders come from him. Some others, like Manuel, is straw bosses maybe, but no more. Tame animals.

"And then Per mentions the idea of God."

Van Rijn crossed himself with a somewhat irritating piety. "I make no blasfuming," he said. "But everybody knows our picture of God comes in part from our kings. If you want to know how Oriental kings in ancient days was spoken to, look in your prayer book. Even now, we admit He is the Lord, and we is supposed to do His will, hoping He will not take too serious a few things that happen to anybody like anger, pride, envy, gluttony, lust, sloth, greed, and the rest what makes life fun.

"Per said this. So Per admitted he had a master. But then he must also be a Lugal—an animal. No Yildivan could possible confess to having even a mythical master, as shown by the fact they have no religion themselves though their Lugals seem to.

"Give old boy Shivaru his credits, he came again with some friends to ask further. What did he learn? He already knew everybody else was a Lugal, because of obeying. Now Per said he was no better than the rest. This confirmed Per was also a Lugal. And what blew the cork out of the bottle was when Per said he nor none of them had any owners at home!

"Whup, whup, slow down, youngster. You could not have known. Always we make discoveries the hard way. Like those poor Yildivans.

"They was real worried, you can imagine. Even dogs turn on people now and then, and surely some Lugals go bad once in a while on Cain and make big trouble before they can get killed. The Yildivans had seen some of your powers, knew you was dangerous—and your breed of Lugal must have gone mad and killed off its own Yildivans. How else could you be Lugals and yet have no masters?

"So. What would you and I do, friends, if we lived in lonely country houses and a pack of wild dogs what had killed people set up shop in our neighborhood?"

Van Rijn gurgled beer down his throat. We pondered for a while. "Seems pretty far-fetched," Harry said.

"No." Per's cheeks burned with excitement. "It fits. Freeman van Rijn put into words what I always felt as I got to know Shivaru. A, a single-mindedness about him. As if he was incapable of seeing certain things, grasping certain ideas, though his reasoning faculties were intrinsically as good as mine. Yes—"

I nodded at my pipe, which had been with me when I clashed against stranger beings than that.

"So two of them first took advantage of you," van Rijn said, "to swindle away what they could before the attack because they wasn't sure the attack would work. No shame there. You was outside the honor concept, being animals. Animals whose ancestors must have murdered a whole race of true humans, in their views. Then the alarmed males tried to scrub you out. They failed, but hoped maybe to use their prisoners for a lever to pry you off their country. Only Manuel fooled them."

"But why'd they change their minds about us?" Per asked.

Van Rijn wagged his finger. "Ha, there you was lucky. You gave a very clear and important order. Your men disobeyed every bit of it. Now Lugals might go crazy and kill off Yildivans, but they are so bred to being bossed that they can't stand long against a leader. Or if they do, it's because they is too crazy to think straight. Manuel, though, was thinking straight like a plumber line. His strategy worked five-four-three-two-one-zero. Also, your people did not kill more Yildivans than was needful, which crazy Lugals would do.

"So you could not be domestic animals after all, gone bad or not. Therefore you had to be wild animals. The Cainite mind—a narrow mind like you said—can't imagine any third horn on that special bull. If you had proved you was not Lugal type, you must be Yildivan type. Indications to the contrariwise, the way you seemed to take orders or acknowledge a Lord, those must have been misunderstandings on the Cainites' part.

"Once he had time to reason this out, Shivaru saw his people had done yours dirty. Partway he felt bad about it in his soul, if he has one stowed somewhere; Yildivans do have some notion about upright behavior to other

Yildivans. And besides, he did not want to lose a chance at your fine trade goods. He convinced his friends. They did what best they could think about to make amendments."

Van Rijn rubbed his palms together in glee. "Oh, ho, ho, what customers they will be for us!" he roared.

We sat still for another time, digesting the idea, until the butler announced dinner. Manuel helped Per rise. "We'll have to instruct everybody who goes to Cain," the boy said. "I mean not to let on that we aren't wild animals, we humans."

"But, Captain," Manuel said, and his head lifted high, "we are."

Van Rijn stopped and looked at us a while. Then he shook his own head violently and shambled bearlike to the viewer wall. "No," he growled. "Some of us are."

"How's that?" Harry wondered.

"We here in this room are wild," van Rijn said. "We do what we do because we want to or because it is right. No other motivation, *nie?* If you made slaves of us, you would for sure not be wise to let us near a weapon.

"But how many slaves has there been, in Earth's long history, that their masters could trust? Quite some! There was even armies of slaves, like the Janissaries. And how many people today is domestic animals at heart? Wanting somebody else should tell them what to do, and take care of their needfuls, and protect them not just against their fellow men but against themselves? Why has every free human society been so short-lived? Is this not because the wild-animal men are born so heartbreaking seldom?"

He glared out across the city, where it winked and glittered beneath the stars, around the curve of the planet. "Do you think they yonder is free?" he shouted. His hand chopped downward in scorn.

THE CRIME AND THE GLORY OF COMMANDER SUZDAL

by Cordwainer Smith (1913 - 1966)
Amazing Stories, May

"Cordwainer Smith" exploded into the science-fiction world in 1950 with the instantly legendary story "Scanners Live in Vain," a savage, startling, astonishingly intense work that appeared in the obscure magazine *Fantasy Book* because none of the commercial science-fiction magazines would touch it. Gradually it became known that the author's real name was Paul Linebarger and that he had been a military advisor to the U.S. government, with a background in political science, sinology, and the techniques of psychological warfare. The long-awaited second Cordwainer Smith story, "The Game of Rat and Dragon," finally appeared in 1955, and it was followed, in the years between 1958 and Dr. Linebarger's early death in 1966, with an extraordinary outpouring of stories and novellas that made him one of science fiction's most talked-about writers. Nearly all his work fits in one way or another into a coherent vision of future history, known as the Instrumentality of Mankind universe.

"The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal," which is entirely characteristic of Smith's work, was the only short story he published in 1964. If space had permitted, we might have included the dazzling novella "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" instead. That year saw publication of two other Smith novellas, "The Boy Who Bought Old Earth" and "The Store of Heart's Desire," which eventually appeared in expanded form as *Norstrilia* (1975). That book is available from NESFA Press, as well as *The Rediscovery of Man,* a complete collection of Smith's short stories that is a cornerstone of any science-fiction library.

Do not read this story; turn the page quickly. The story may upset you. Anyhow, you probably know it already. It is a very disturbing story. Everyone knows it. The glory and the crime of Commander Suzdal have been told in a thousand different ways. Don't let yourself realize that the story is really the truth.

It isn't. Not at all. There's not a bit of truth to it. There is no such planet as Arachosia, no such people as klopts, no such world as Catland. These are all just imaginary, they didn't happen, forget about it, go away and read something else.

The Beginning

Commander Suzdal was sent forth in a shell-ship to explore the outermost reaches of our galaxy. His ship was called a cruiser, but he was the only man in it. He was equipped with hypnotics and cubes to provide him the semblance of company, a large crowd of friendly people who could be convoked out of his own hallucinations.

The Instrumentality even offered him some choice in his imaginary companions, each of whom was embodied in a small ceramic cube containing the brain of a small animal but imprinted with the personality of an actual human being.

Suzdal, a short, stocky man with a jolly smile, was blunt about his needs:

"Give me two good security officers. I can manage the ship, but if I'm going into the unknown, I'll need help in meeting the strange problems which might show up."

The loading official smiled at him. "I never heard of a cruiser commander who *asked* for security officers. Most people regard them as an utter nuisance."

"That's all right," said Suzdal. "I don't."

"Don't you want some chess players?"

"I can play chess," said Suzdal, "all I want to, using the spare computers. All I have to do is set the power down and they start losing. On full power, they always beat me."

The official then gave Suzdal an odd look. He did not exactly leer, but his expression became both intimate and a little unpleasant. "What about other companions?" he asked, with a funny little edge to his voice.

"I've got books," said Suzdal, "a couple of thousand. I'm going to be gone only a couple of years Earth time."

"Local-subjective, it might be several thousand years," said the official, "though the time will wind back up again as you re-approach Earth. And I wasn't talking about books," he repeated, with the same funny, prying lilt to his voice.

Suzdal shook his head with momentary worry, ran his hand through his sandy hair. His blue eyes were forthright and he looked straightforwardly into the official's eyes. "What do you mean, then, if not books? Navigators? I've got them, not to mention the turtle-men. They're good company, if you just talk to them slowly enough and then give them plenty of time to answer. Don't forget, I've been out before…"

The official spat out his offer: "Dancing girls. WOMEN. Concubines. Don't you want any of those? We could even cube your own wife for you and print her mind on a cube for you. That way she could be with you every week that you were awake."

Suzdal looked as though he would spit on the floor in sheer disgust. "Alice? You mean, you want me to travel around with a ghost of her? How would the real Alice feel when I came back? Don't tell me that you're going to put my wife on a mousebrain. You're just offering me delirium. I've got to keep my wits out there with space and time rolling in big waves around me. I'm going to be crazy enough, just as it is. Don't forget, I've been out there before. Getting back to a real Alice is going to be one of my biggest reality factors. It will help me to get home." At this point, Suzdal's own voice took on the note of intimate inquiry, as he added, "Don't tell me that a lot of cruiser commanders ask to go flying around with imaginary wives. That would be pretty nasty, in my opinion. Do many of them do it?"

"We're here to get you loaded on board ship, not to discuss what other officers do or do not do. Sometimes we think it good to have a female companion on the ship with the commander, even if she is imaginary. If you ever found anything among the stars which took on female form, you'd be mighty vulnerable to it."

"Females, among the stars? Bosh!" said Suzdal.

"Strange things have happened," said the official.

"Not that," said Suzdal. "Pain, craziness, distortion, panic without end, a craze for food—yes, those I can look for and face. They will be there. But females, no. There aren't any. I love my wife. I won't make females up out of my own mind. After all, I'll have the turtle-people aboard, and they will be bringing up their young. I'll have plenty of family life to watch and to take part in. I can even give Christmas parties for the young ones."

"What kind of parties are those?" asked the official.

"Just a funny little ancient ritual that I heard about from an Outer Pilot. You give all the young things presents, once every local-subjective year."

"It sounds nice," said the official, his voice growing tired and final. "You still refuse to have a cube-woman on board. You wouldn't have to activate her unless you really needed her."

"You haven't flown, yourself, have you ?" asked Suzdal.

It was the official's turn to flush. "No," he said, flatly.

"Anything that's in that ship, I'm going to think about. I'm a cheerful sort of man, and very friendly. Let me just get along with my turtle-people. They're not lively, but they are considerate and restful. Two thousand or more years, local-subjective, is a lot of time. Don't give me additional decisions to make. It's work enough, running the ship. Just leave me alone with my turtle-people. I've gotten along with them before."

"You, Suzdal, are the commander," said the loading official. "We'll do as you say."

"Fine," smiled Suzdal. "You may get a lot of queer types on this run, but I'm not one of them."

The two men smiled agreement at one another and the loading of the ship was completed.

The ship itself was managed by turtle-men, who aged very slowly, so that while Suzdal coursed the outer rim of the galaxy and let the thousands of years—local count—go past while he slept in his frozen bed, the turtle-men rose generation by generation, trained their young to work the ship, taught the stories of the earth that they would never see again, and read the computers correctly, to awaken Suzdal only when there was a need for human intervention and for human intelligence. Suzdal awakened from time to time, did his work and then went back. He felt that he had been gone from earth only a few months.

Months indeed! He had been gone more than a subjective ten-thousand years, when he met the siren capsule.

It looked like an ordinary distress capsule. The kind of thing that was often shot through space to indicate some complication of the destiny of man among the stars. This capsule had apparently been flung across an immense distance, and from the capsule Suzdal got the story of Arachosia.

The story was false. The brains of a whole planet—the wild genius of a malevolent, unhappy race—had been dedicated to the problem of ensnaring and attracting a normal pilot from Old Earth. The story which the capsule sang conveyed the rich personality of a wonderful woman with a contralto voice. The story was true, in part. The appeals were real, in part. Suzdal listened to the story and it sank, like a wonderfully orchestrated piece of grand opera, right into the fibers of his brain. It would have been different if he had known the real story.

Everybody now knows the real story of Arachosia, the bitter terrible story of the planet which was a paradise, which turned into a hell. The story of how people got to be something different from people. The story of what happened way out there in the most dreadful place among the stars.

He would have fled if he knew the real story. He couldn't understand what we now know:

Mankind could not meet the terrible people of Arachosia without the people of Arachosia following them home and bringing to mankind a grief greater than grief, a craziness worse than mere insanity, a plague surpassing all imaginable plagues. The Arachosians had become *un*-people, and yet, in their innermost imprinting of their personalities, they remained people. They sang songs which exalted their own deformity and which praised themselves for what they had so horribly become, and yet, in their own songs, in their own ballads, the organ tones of the refrain rang out,

And I mourn Man!

They knew what they were and they hated themselves. Hating themselves they pursued mankind.

Perhaps they are still pursuing mankind.

The Instrumentality has by now taken good pains that the Arachosians will never find us again, has flung networks of deception out along the edge of the galaxy to make sure that those lost ruined people cannot find us. The Instrumentality knows and guards our world and all the other worlds of mankind against the deformity which has become Arachosia. We want nothing to do with Arachosia. Let them hunt for us. They won't find us.

How could Suzdal know that?

This was the first time someone had met the Arachosians, and he met them only with a message in which an elfin voice sang the elfin song of ruin, using perfectly clear words in the old common tongue to tell a story so sad, so abominable, that mankind has not forgotten it yet. In its essence the story was very simple. This is what Suzdal heard, and what people have learned ever since then.

The Arachosians were settlers. Settlers could go out by sail-ship, trailing behind them the pods. That was the first way.

Or they could go out by planoform ship, ships piloted by skillful men, who went into space-two and came out again and found man.

Or for very long distances indeed, they could go out in the new combination. Individual pods packed into an enormous shell-ship, a gigantic version of Suzdal's own ship. The sleepers frozen, the machines waking, the ship fired to and beyond the speed of light, flung below space, coming out at random and homing on a suitable target. It was a gamble, but brave men took it. If no target was found, their machines might course space forever, while the bodies, protected by freezing as they were, spoiled bit by bit, and while the dim light of life went out in the individual frozen brains.

The shell-ships were the answers of mankind to an over-population, which neither the old planet Earth nor its daughter planets could quite respond to. The shell-ships took the bold, the reckless, the romantic, the willful, sometimes the criminals out among the stars. Mankind lost track of these ships, over and over again. The advance explorers, the organized Instrumentality, would stumble upon human beings, cities and cultures, high or low, tribes or families, where the shell-ships had gone on, far, far beyond the outermost limits of mankind, where the instruments of search had found an earth-like planet, and the shell-ship, like some great dying insect, had dropped to the planet, awakened its people, broken open, and destroyed itself with its delivery of newly re-born men and women, to settle a world.

Arachosia looked like a good world to the men and women who came to it. Beautiful beaches, with cliffs like endless rivieras rising above. Two bright big moons in the sky, a sun not too far away. The machines had pre-tested the atmosphere and sampled the water, had already scattered the forms of old earth life into the atmosphere and in the seas so that as the people awakened they heard the singing of earth birds and they knew that earth fish had already been adapted to the oceans and flung in, there to multiply. It seemed a good life, a rich life. Things went well.

Things went very, very well for the Arachosians.

This is the truth.

This was, thus far, the story told by the capsule.

But here they diverged.

The capsule did not tell the dreadful, pitiable truth about Arachosia. It invented a set of plausible lies. The voice which came telepathically out of the capsule was that of a mature, warm happy female—some woman of early middle age with a superb speaking contralto.

Suzdal almost fancied that he talked to it, so real was the personality. How could he know that he was being beguiled, trapped?

It sounded right, *really* right.

"And then," said the voice, "the Arachosian sickness has been hitting us. Do not land. Stand off. Talk to us. Tell us about medicine. Our young die, without reason. Our farms are rich, and the wheat here is more golden than it was on earth, the plums more purple, the flowers whiter. Everything does well—except people.

"Our young die..." said the womanly voice, ending in a sob.

"Are there any symptoms?" thought Suzdal, and almost as though it had heard his question, the capsule went on.

"They die of nothing. Nothing which our medicine can test, nothing which our science can show. They die. Our population is dropping. People, do not forget us! Man, whoever you are, come quickly, come now, bring help! But for your own sake, do not land. Stand off-planet and view us through screens so that you can take word back to the Home of Man about the lost children of mankind among the strange and outermost stars!"

Strange, indeed!

The truth was far stranger, and very ugly indeed.

Suzdal was convinced of the truth of the message. He had been selected for the trip because he was good-natured, intelligent, and brave; this appeal touched all three of his qualities.

Later, much later, when he was arrested, Suzdal was asked, "Suzdal, you fool, why didn't you test the message? You've risked the safety of all the mankinds for a foolish appeal!"

"It wasn't foolish!" snapped Suzdal. "That distress capsule had a sad, wonderful womanly voice and the story checked out true."

"With whom?" said the investigator, flatly and dully.

Suzdal sounded weary and sad when he replied to the point. "It checked out with my books. With my knowledge." Reluctantly he added, "And with my own judgment..."

"Was your judgment good?" said the investigator.

"No," said Suzdal, and let the single word hang on the air though it might be the last word he would ever speak.

But it was Suzdal himself who broke the silence when he added, "Before I set course and went to sleep, I activated my security officers in cubes and had them check the story. They got the real story of Arachosia, all right. They cross-ciphered it out of patterns in the distress capsule and they told me the whole real story very quickly, just as I was waking up."

"And what did you do?"

"I did what I did. I did that for which I expect to be punished. The Arachosians were already walking around the outside of my hull by then. They had caught my ship. They had caught me. How was I to know that the wonderful, sad story was true only for the first twenty full years that the woman told about. And she wasn't even a woman. Just a klopt. Only the first twenty years..."

Things had gone well for the Arachosians for the first twenty years. Then came disaster, but it was not the tale told in the distress capsule.

They couldn't understand it. They didn't know why it had to happen to them. They didn't know why it waited twenty years, three months and four days. But their time came.

We think it must have been something in the radiation of their sun. Or perhaps a combination of that particular sun's radiation and the chemistry, which even the wise machines in the shell-ship had not fully analyzed, which reached out and was spread from within. The disaster hit. It was a simple one and utterly unstoppable.

They had doctors. They had hospitals. They even had a limited capacity for research.

But they could not research fast enough. Not enough to meet this disaster. It was simple, monstrous, enormous.

Femininity became carcinogenetic.

Every woman on the planet began developing cancer at the same time, on her lips, in her breasts, in her groin, sometimes along the edge of her jaw, the edge of her lip, the tender portions of her body. The cancer had many forms, and yet it was always the same. There was something about the radiation which reached through, which reached into the human body, and which made a particular form of desoxycorticosterone turn into a subform—unknown on earth—of pregnandiol, which infallibly caused cancer. The advance was rapid.

The little baby girls began to die first. The women clung weeping to their fathers, their husbands. The mothers tried to say goodbye to their sons.

One of the doctors, herself, was a woman, a strong woman.

Remorselessly, she cut live tissue from her living body, put it under the microscope, took samples of her own urine, her blood, her spit, and she came up with the answer: *There is no answer.* And yet there was something better and worse than an answer.

If the sun of Arachosia killed everything which was female, if the female fish floated upside down on the surface of the sea, if the female birds sang a shriller, wilder song as they died above the eggs which would never hatch, if the female animals grunted and growled in the lairs where they hid away with pain, female human beings did not have to accept death so tamely. The doctor's name was Astarte Kraus.

The Magic of the Klopts

The human female could do what the animal female could not. She could turn male. With the help of equipment from the ship, tremendous quantities of testosterone were manufactured, and every single girl and woman still surviving was turned into a man. Massive injections were administered to all of them. Their faces grew heavy, they all returned to growing a little bit, their chests flattened out, their muscles grew stronger, and in less than three months they were indeed men.

Some lower forms of life had survived because they were not polarized clearly enough to the forms of male and female, which depended on that particular organic chemistry for survival. With the fish gone, plants clotted the oceans; the birds were gone but the insects survived; dragonflies, butterflies, mutated versions of grasshoppers, beetles, and other insects swarmed over the planet. The men who had lost women worked side by side with the men who had been made out of the bodies of women.

When they knew each other, it was unutterably sad for them to meet. Husband and wife, both bearded, strong, quarrelsome, desperate and busy. The little boys somehow realizing that they would never grow up to have sweethearts, to have wives, to get married, to have daughters.

But what was a mere world to stop the driving brain and the burning intellect of Dr. Astarte Kraus? She became the leader of her people, the men and the men-women. She drove them forward, she made them survive, she used cold brains on all of them.

(Perhaps, if she had been a sympathetic person, she would have let them die. But it was the nature of Dr. Kraus not to be sympathetic—just brilliant, remorseless, implacable against the universe which had tried to destroy her.)

Before she died, Dr. Kraus had worked out a carefully programmed genetic system. Little bits of the men's tissues could be implanted by a surgical routine in the abdomens, just inside the peritoneal wall, crowding a little bit against the intestines, an artificial womb and artificial chemistry and artificial insemination by radiation, by heat made it possible for men to bear boy children.

What was the use of having girl children if they all died? The people of Arachosia went on. The first generation lived through the tragedy, half insane with the grief and disappointment. They sent out message capsules and they knew that their messages would reach earth in 6 million years.

As new explorers, they had gambled on going further than other ships went. They had found a good world, but they were not quite sure where they were. Were they still within the familiar galaxy, or had they jumped beyond to one of the nearby galaxies? They couldn't quite tell. It was a part of the policy of old earth not to overequip the exploring parties for fear that some of them, taking violent cultural change or becoming aggressive empires, might turn back on earth and destroy it. Earth always made sure that it had the advantages.

The third and fourth and fifth generations of Arachosians were still people. All of them were male. They had the human memory, they had human books, they knew the words "mama," "sister," "sweetheart," but they no longer really understood what these terms referred to.

The human body, which had taken four million years on earth to grow, has immense resources within it, resources greater than the brain, or the personality, or the hopes of the individual. And the bodies of the Arachosians decided things for them. Since the chemistry of femininity meant instant death, and since an occasional girl baby was born dead and buried casually, the bodies made the adjustment. The men of Arachosia became both men and women. They gave themselves the ugly nickname, "klopt." Since they did not have the rewards of family life, they became strutting cockerels, who mixed their love with murder, who blended their songs with duels, who sharpened their weapons and who earned the right to reproduce within a strange family system which no decent earth-man would find comprehensible.

But they did survive.

And the method of their survival was so sharp, so fierce, that it was indeed a difficult thing to understand.

In less than four hundred years the Arachosians had civilized into groups of fighting clans. They still had just one planet around just one sun. They lived in just one place. They had a few spacecraft they had built themselves. Their science, their art and their music moved forward with strange lurches of inspired neurotic genius, because they lacked the fundamentals in the human personality itself, the balance of male and female, the family, the operations of love, of hope, of reproduction. They survived, but they themselves had become monsters and did not know it.

Out of their memory of old mankind they created a legend of old earth. Women in that memory were deformities, who should be killed. Misshapen beings, who should be erased. The family, as they recalled it, was filth and abomination which they were resolved to wipe out if they should ever meet it.

They, themselves, were bearded homosexuals, with rouged lips, ornate earrings, fine heads of hair, and very few old men among them. They killed off their men before they became old; the things they could not get from love or relaxation or comfort, they purchased with battle and death. They made up songs proclaiming themselves to be the last of the old men and the first of the new, and they sang their hate to mankind when they should meet, and they sang, "Woe is earth that we should find it," and yet something inside them made them add to almost every song a refrain which troubled even them,

And I mourn Man!

They mourned mankind and yet they plotted to attack all of humanity.

The Trap

Suzdal had been deceived by the message capsule. He put himself back in the sleeping compartment and he directed the turtle-men to take the cruiser to Arachosia, wherever it might be. He did not do this crazily or wantonly. He did it as a matter of deliberate judgment. A judgment for which he was later heard, tried, judged fairly and then put to something worse than death.

He deserved it.

He sought for Arachosia without stopping to think of the most fundamental rule: How could he keep the Arachosians, singing monsters that they were, from following him home to the eventual ruin of earth? Might not their condition be a disease which could be contagious, or might not their fierce society destroy the other societies of men and leave earth and all of other men's worlds in ruin? He did not think of this, so he was heard, and tried and punished much later. We will come to that.

The Arrival

Suzdal awakened in orbit off Arachosia. And he awakened knowing he had made a mistake. Strange ships clung to his shell-ship like evil barnacles from an unknown ocean, attached to a familiar water craft. He called to his turtle-men to press the controls and the controls did not work.

The outsiders, whoever they were, man or woman or beast or god, had enough technology to immobilize his ship. Suzdal immediately realized his mistake. Naturally, he thought of destroying himself and the ship, but he was afraid that if he destroyed himself and missed destroying the ship completely there was a chance that his cruiser, a late model with recent weapons, would fall into the hands of whoever it was walking on the outer dome of his own cruiser. He could not afford the risk of mere individual suicide. He had to take a more drastic step. This was not time for obeying earth rules.

His security officer—a cube ghost wakened to human form—whispered the whole story to him in quick intelligent gasps:

"They are people, sir.

"More people than I am.

"I'm a ghost, an echo working out of a dead brain.

"These are real people, Commander Suzdal, but they are the worst people ever to get loose among the stars. You must destroy them, sir!"

"I can't," said Suzdal, still trying to come fully awake. "They're *people*."

"Then you've got to beat them off. By any means, sir. By any means whatever. Save Earth. Stop them. Warn Earth."

"And I?" asked Suzdal, and was immediately sorry that he had asked the selfish, personal question.

"You will die or you will be punished," said the security officer sympathetically, "and I do not know which one will be worse."

"Now?"

"Right now. There is no time left for you. No time at all."

"But the rules...?"

"You have already strayed far outside of rules."

There were rules, but Suzdal left them all behind.

Rules, rules for ordinary times, for ordinary places, for understandable dangers.

This was a nightmare cooked up by the flesh of man, motivated by the brains of man. Already his monitors were bringing him news of who these people were, these seeming maniacs, these men who had never known women, these boys who had grown to lust and battle, who had a family structure which the normal human brain could not accept, could not believe, could not tolerate. The things on the outside were people, and they weren't. The things on the outside had the human brain, the human imagination, and the human capacity for revenge, and yet Suzdal, a brave officer, was so frightened by the mere nature of them that he did not respond to their efforts to communicate.

He could feel the turtle-women among his crew aching with fright itself, as they realized who was pounding on their ship and who it was that sang through loud announcing machines that they wanted *in, in, in.*

Suzdal committed a crime. It is the pride of the Instrumentality that the Instrumentality allows its officers to commit crimes or mistakes or suicide. The Instrumentality does the things for mankind that a computer cannot do. The Instrumentality leaves the human brain, the human choice in action.

The Instrumentality passes dark knowledge to its staff, things not usually understood in the inhabited world, things prohibited to ordinary men and women because the officers of the Instrumentality, the captains and the sub-chiefs and the chiefs, must know their jobs. If they do not, all mankind might perish.

Suzdal reached into his arsenal. He knew what he was doing. The larger moon of Arachosia was habitable. He could see that there were earth plants already on it, and earth insects. His monitors showed him that the Arachosian men-women had not bothered to settle on the planet. He threw an agonized inquiry at his computers and cried out: "Read me the age it's in!"

The machine sang back, "More than thirty million years."

Suzdal had strange resources. He had twins or quadruplets of almost every earth animal. The earth animals were carried in tiny capsules no larger than a medicine capsule and they consisted of the sperm and the ovum of the higher animals, ready to be matched for sowing, ready to be imprinted; he also had small life-bombs which could surround any form of life with at least a chance of survival.

He went to the bank and he got cats, eight pairs, sixteen earth cats, *Felis domesticus,* the kind of cat that you and I know, the kind of cat which is bred, sometimes for telepathic uses, sometimes to go along on the ships and serve as auxiliary weapons when the minds of the pinlighters direct the cats to fight off dangers.

He coded these cats. He coded them with messages just as monstrous as the messages which had made the men-women of Arachosia into monsters. This is what he coded:

Do not breed true.
Invent new chemistry.
You will serve man.
Become civilized.
Learn speech.
You will serve man.
When man calls you will serve man.
Go back, and come forth.
Serve man.

These instructions were no mere verbal instructions. They were imprints on the actual molecular structure of the animals. They were changes in the genetic and biological coding which went with these cats. And then Suzdal committed his offense against the laws of mankind. He had a chronopathic device on board the ship. A time distorter, usually to be used for a moment or a second or two to bring the ship away from utter destruction.

The men-women of Arachosia were already cutting through the hull.

He could hear their high, hooting voices screaming delirious pleasure at one another as they regarded him as the first of their promised enemies that they had ever met, the first of the monsters from old earth who had finally overtaken them. The true, evil people on whom they, the men-women of Arachosia, would be revenged.

Suzdal remained calm. He coded the genetic cats. He loaded them into life-bombs. He adjusted the controls of his chronopathic machine illegally, so that instead of reaching one second for a ship of 80,000 tons, they reached two million years for a load of less than four kilos. He flung the cats into the nameless moon of Arachosia.

And he flung them back in time.

And he knew he did not have to wait.

He didn't.

The Catland Suzdal Made

The cats came. Their ships glittered in the naked sky above Arachosia. Their little combat craft attacked. The cats who had not existed a moment before, but who had then had two million years in which to follow a destiny printed right into their brains, printed down their spinal cords, etched into the chemistry of their bodies and personalities. The cats had turned into people of a kind, with speech, intelligence, hope, and a mission. Their mission was to attack Suzdal, to rescue him, to obey him, and to damage Arachosia.

The cat ships screamed their battle warnings:

"This is the day of the year of the promised age. And *now come cats!*"

The Arachosians had waited for battle for 4,000 years and now they got it. The cats attacked them. Two of the cat craft recognized Suzdal, and the cats reported,

"Oh Lord, oh God, oh Maker of all things, oh Commander of Time, oh Beginner of Life, we have waited since Everything began to serve You, to serve Your Name, to obey Your Glory! May we live for You, may we die for You. We are Your people."

Suzdal cried and threw his message to all the cats.

"Harry the klopts but don't kill them all!"

He repeated, "Harry them and stop them until I escape." He flung his cruiser into non-space and escaped.

Neither cat nor Arachosian followed him.

And that's the story, but the tragedy is that Suzdal got back. And the Arachosians are still there and the cats are still there. Perhaps the Instrumentality knows where they are, perhaps the Instrumentality does not. Mankind does not really want to find out. It is against all law to bring up a form of life superior to man. Perhaps the cats are. Perhaps somebody knows whether the Arachosians won and killed the cats and added the cat science to their own and are now looking for us somewhere, probing like blind men through the stars for us true human beings to meet, to hate, to kill. Or perhaps the cats won.

Perhaps the cats are imprinted a strange mission, by weird hopes of serving men they don't recognize. Perhaps they think we are all Arachosians and should be saved only for some particular cruiser commander, whom they will never see again. They won't see Suzdal, because we know what happened to him.

The Trial of Suzdal

Suzdal was brought to trial on a great stage in the open world. His trial was recorded. He had gone in when he should not have gone in. He had searched for the Arachosians without waiting and asking for advice and reinforcements. What business was it of his to relieve a distress ages old? What business indeed?

And then the cats. We had the records of the ship to show that something came out of that moon. Spacecraft, things with voices, things that could communicate with the human brain. We're not even sure, since they transmitted directly into the receiver computers, that they spoke an earth language. Perhaps they did it with some sort of direct telepathy. But the crime was, *Suzdal had succeeded.*

By throwing the cats back two million years, by coding them to survive, coding them to develop civilization, coding them to come to his rescue, he had created a whole new world in less than one second of objective time.

His chronopathic device had flung the little life-bombs back to the wet earth of the big moon over Arachosia and in less time than it takes to record this, the bombs came back in the form of a fleet built by a race, an earth race, though of cat origin, two million years old.

The court stripped Suzdal of his name and said, "You will not be named Suzdal any longer."

The court stripped Suzdal of his rank.

"You will not be a commander of this or of any other navy, neither imperial nor of the Instrumentality."

The court stripped Suzdal of his life. "You will not live longer, former Commander, and former Suzdal."

And then the court stripped Suzdal of death.

"You will go to the planet Shayol, the place of uttermost shame from which no one ever returns. You will go there with the contempt and hatred of mankind. We will not punish you. We do not wish to know about you any more. You will live on, but for us you will have ceased to exist."

That's the story. It's a sad, wonderful story. The Instrumentality tries to cheer up all the different kinds of mankind by telling them it isn't true, it's just a ballad.

Perhaps the records do exist. Perhaps somewhere the crazy klopts of Arachosia breed their boyish young, deliver their babies, always by Caesarean, feed them always by bottle, generations of men who have known fathers and who have no idea of what the word *mother* might be. And perhaps the Arachosians spend their crazy lives in endless battle with intelligent cats who are serving a mankind that may never come back.

That's the story.

Furthermore, it isn't true.

THE GRAVEYARD HEART

by Roger Zelazny (1937 - 1995)
Fantastic, March

Roger Zelazny first appeared among us in 1962 with a handful of very brief and generally inconsequential short stories, flared like a supernova the following year with the astonishing and now classic longer story "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," and further enhanced his reputation a few months later with a second powerful novella, "The Graveyard Heart." As can be seen here, it displays all of the virtues that we would soon come to associate with Zelazny's work: the breathless narrative pace, the dazzling style, the sparkling ideas, the overall polish and sophistication.

He was just warming up. Just ahead were his first award-winners, the novel "...And Call Me Conrad," also known as *This Immortal,* the novella "He Who Shapes," (a.k.a. *The Dream Master)* and the novelet "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," all published in 1965, and the spectacular novel *Lord of Light* of 1967. Though he was unable to maintain such peaks of intensity in the work of the decades that followed, his books and stories were always well liked and frequently honored with awards, and even the least of his tales was well worth paying attention to. The death of this beloved writer at the age of 58 in the summer of 1995 came as a brutal shock to the science-fiction community.

They were dancing,

—at the party of the century, the party of the millennium, and the Party of Parties,

—really, as well as calendar-wise,

—and he wanted to crush her, to tear her to pieces...

Moore did not really see the pavilion through which they moved, nor regard the hundred faceless shadows that glided about them. He did not take particular note of the swimming globes of colored light that followed above and behind them.

He felt these things, but he did not necessarily sniff wilderness in that ever-green relic of Christmas past turning on its bright pedestal in the center of the room—shedding its fireproofed needles and traditions these six days after the fact.

All of these were abstracted and dismissed, inhaled and filed away…

In a few more moments it would be Two Thousand.

Leota (née Lilith) rested in the bow of his arm like a quivering arrow, until he wanted to break her or send her flying (he knew not where), to crush her into limpness, to make that samadhi, myopia, or whatever, go away from her graygreen eyes. At about that time, each time, she would lean against him and whisper something into his ear, something in French, a language he did not yet speak. She followed his inept lead so perfectly though, that it was not unwarranted that he should feel she could read his mind by pure kinesthesia.

Which made it all the worse then, whenever her breath collared his neck with a moist warmness that spread down under his jacket like an invisible infection. Then he would mutter "C'est vrai" or "Damn" or both, and try to crush her bridal whiteness and she would become an arrow once more. But she was dancing with him, which was a decided improvement over his last year/her yesterday.

It was almost Two Thousand.

Now…

The music broke itself apart and grew back together again as the globes blared daylight. Auld acquaintance, he was reminded, was not a thing to be trifled with.

He almost chuckled then, but the lights went out a moment later and he found himself occupied.

A voice speaking right beside him, beside everyone, stated:

"It is now Two Thousand. Happy New Year!"

He crushed her.

No one cared about Times Square. The crowds in the Square had been watching a relay of the Party on a jerryscreen the size of a football field. Even now the onlookers were being amused by blacklight closeups of the couples on the dance floor. Perhaps at that very moment, Moore decided, they themselves were the subject of a hilarious sequence being served up before that overflowing Petri dish across the ocean. It was quite likely, considering his partner.

He did not care if they laughed at him, though. He had come too far to care.

"I love you," he said silently. (He used mental dittos to presume an answer, and this made him feel somewhat happier.) Then the lights fireflied once more and auld acquaintance was remembered. A blizzard compounded of a hundred smashed rainbows began falling about the couples; slow-melting spirals of confetti drifted through the lights, dissolving as they descended upon the dancers; furry-edged projections of Chinese dragon kites swam overhead, grinning their way through the storm.

They resumed dancing and he asked her the same question he had asked her the year before.

"Can't we be alone, together, somewhere, just for a moment?"

She smothered a yawn.

"No, I'm bored. I'm going to leave in half an hour."

If voices can be throaty and rich, hers was an opulent neckful. Her throat was golden, to a well-sunned turn.

"Then let's spend it talking—in one of the little dining rooms."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry. I must be seen for the next half hour."

Primitive Moore, who had spent most of his life dozing at the back of Civilized Moore's brain, rose to his haunches then, with a growl. Civilized Moore muzzled him though, because he did not wish to spoil things.

"When can I see you again?" he asked grimly.

"Perhaps Bastille Day," she whispered throatily. "There's the Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité Fête Nue…"

"Where?"

"In the New Versailles Dome, at nine. If you'd like an invitation I'll see that you receive one…."

"Yes, I do want one."

("She made you ask," jeered Primitive Moore.)

"Very well, you'll receive one in May."

"Won't you spare me a day or so now?"

She shook her head, her blue-blonde coif burning his face.

"Time is too dear," she whispered in mock-Camille pathos, "and the days of the Parties are without end.—You ask me to cut years off my life and hand them to you."

"That's right."

"You ask too much," she smiled.

He wanted to curse her right then and walk away, but he wanted even moreso to stay with her. He was twenty-seven, an age of which he did not approve in the first place, and he had spent all of the year 1999 wanting her. He had decided two years ago that he was going to fall in love and marry—because he could finally afford to do so without altering his standards of living. Lacking a woman who combined the better qualities of

Aphrodite and a digital computer, he had spent an entire year on safari, trekking after the spoor of his starcrossed.

The invitation to the Bledsoes' Orbiting New Year—which had hounded the old year around the world, chasing it over the International Date Line and off of the Earth entirely, to wherever old years go—had set him back a month's pay, but had given him his first live glimpse of Leota Mathilde Mason, belle of the Sleepers. Forgetting about digital computers, he decided then and there to fall in love with her. He was old-fashioned in many respects.

He had spoken with her for precisely ninety-seven seconds, the first twenty of which had been Arctic. But he realized that she existed to be admired, so he insisted on admiring her. Finally, she consented to be seen dancing with him at the Millennium Party in Stockholm.

He had spent the following year anticipating her seduction back to a reasonable and human mode of existence. Now, in the most beautiful city in the world, she had just informed him that she was bored and was about to retire until Bastille Day. It was then that Primitive Moore realized what Civilized Moore must really have known all along: the next time that he saw her she would be approximately two days older and he would be going on twenty-nine. Time stands still for the Set, but the price of mortal existence is age. Money could buy her the most desirable of all narcissist indulgences: the cold-bunk.

And he had not even had the chance of a Stockholm snowflake in the Congo to speak with her, to speak more than a few disjointed sentences, let alone to try talking her out of the icebox club. (Even now, Setman laureate Wayne Unger was moving to cut in on him, with the self-assured expression of a golf pro about to give a lesson.)

"Hello, Leota.—Sorry, Mister Uh."

Primitive Moore snarled and bashed him with his club; Civilized Moore, without a word, released one of the most inaccessible women in the world to a god of the Set.

She was smiling. He was smiling. They were gone.

All the way around the world to San Francisco, sitting in the bar of the stratocruiser, in the year of Our Lord Two Thousand—that is to say: two, zero, zero, zero—Moore felt that Time was out of joint.

It was two days before he made up his mind what he was going to do about it.

He asked himself (from the blister balcony of his suite in the Hundred Towers of the Hilton-Frisco Complex): Is this the girl I want to marry?

He answered himself (looking alternately at the traffic capillaries below his shoetops and the Bay): Yes.

Why? he wanted to know.

Because she is beautiful, he answered, and the future will be lovely. I want her for my beautiful wife in the lovely future.

So he decided to join the Set.

He realized it was no mean feat he was mapping out. First, he required money, lots of money—green acres of Presidents, to be strewn properly in the proper places. The next requisite was distinction, recognition. Unfortunately, the world was full of electrical engineers, humming through their twenty-hour weeks, dallying with pet projects—competent, capable, even inspired—who did not have these things. So he knew it would be difficult.

He submerged himself into research with a unique will: forty, sixty, eighty hours a week he spent—reading, designing, studying taped courses in subjects he had never needed. He gave up on recreation.

By May, when he received his invitation, he stared at the engraved (not fac-copy) parchment (not jot-sheet) with bleary eyes. He had already had nine patents entered and three more were pending. He had sold one and was negotiating with Akwa Mining over a water purification process which he had, he felt, fallen into. Money he would have, he decided, if he could keep up the pace.

Possibly even some recognition. That part now depended mainly on his puro-process and what he did with the money. Leota (née Lorelei) lurked beneath his pages of formulae, was cubed Braquelike in the lines on his sketcher; she burnt as he slept, slept as he burned.

In June he decided he needed a rest.

"Assistant Division Chief Moore," he told the face in the groomer (his laudatory attitude toward work had already earned him a promotion at the Seal-Lock Division of Pressure Units, Corporate), "you need more French and better dancing."

The groomer hands patted away at his sandy stubble and slashed smooth the shagginess above his ears. The weary eyes before him agreed bluely; they were tired of studying abstractions.

The intensity of his recreation, however, was as fatiguing in its own way as his work had been. His muscle tone *did* improve as he sprang weightlessly through the Young Men's Christian Association Satellite-3 Trampoline Room; his dance steps seemed more graceful after he had spun with a hundred robots and ten dozen women; he took the accelerated Berlitz drug-course in French (eschewing the faster electrocerebral-stimulation series, because of a rumored transference that might slow his reflexes later that summer); and he felt that he was beginning to sound better—he had hired a gabcoach, and he bakeovened Restoration plays into his pillow (and hopefully, into his head) whenever he slept (generally every third day now)—so that, as the day of the Fête drew near, he began feeling like a Renaissance courtier (a tired one).

As he stared at Civilized Moore inside his groomer, Primitive Moore wondered how long that feeling would last.

Two days before Versailles he cultivated a uniform tan and decided what he was going to say to Leota this time:

—I love you? (Hell, no!)

—Will you quit the cold circuit? (Uh-uh.)

—If I join the Set, will you join me? (That seemed the best way to put it.)

Their third meeting, then, was to be on different terms. No more stakeouts in the wastes of the prosaic. The hunter was going to enter the brush. "Onward!" grinned the Moore in the groomer, "and Excelsior!"

She was dressed in a pale blue, mutie orchid corsage. The revolving dome of the palace spun singing zodiacs and the floors fluoresced witchfires. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the damned flowers were growing there, right above her left breast, like an exotic parasite; and he resented their intrusion with a parochial possessiveness that he knew was not of the Renaissance. Nevertheless…

"Good evening. How do your flowers grow?"

"Barely, and quite contrary," she decided, sipping something green through a long straw, "but they cling to life."

"With an understandable passion," he noted, taking her hand, which she did not withdraw. "Tell me, Eve of the Microprosopos—where are you headed?"

Interest flickered across her face and came to rest in her eyes.

"Your French has improved, Adam—Kadmon…?" she noted. "I'm headed ahead. Where are you headed?"

"The same way."

"I doubt it—unfortunately."

"Doubt all you want, but we're parallel flows already."

"Is that a conceit drawn from some engineering laureate?"

"Watch me engineer a cold-bunk," he stated.

Her eyes shot x-rays through him, warming his bones.

"I knew you had something on your mind. If you were serious."

"Us fallen spirits have to stick together here in Malkuth—I'm serious." He coughed and talked eyetalk. "Shall we stand together as though we're dancing? I see Unger, he sees us, and I want you."

"All right."

She placed her glass on a drifting tray and followed him out onto the floor and beneath the turning zodiac, leaving Setman Unger to face a labyrinth of flesh. Moore laughed at his predicament.

"It's harder to tell identities at an anti-costume party."

She smiled.

"You know, you dance differently today than last night."

"I know. Listen, how do I get a private iceberg and a key to Schlaraffenland? I've decided it might be amusing. I know that it's not a matter of genealogy, or even money for that matter, although both seem to help. I've read all the literature, but I could use some practical advice."

Her hand quivered ever so slightly in his own.

"You know of the Doyenne./?" she said/asked.

"Mainly rumors," he replied, "to the effect that she's an old gargoyle they've frozen to frighten away the Beast come Armageddon."

Leota did not smile. Instead, she became an arrow again.

"More or less," she replied coldly. "She does keep beastly people out of the Set."

Civilized Moore bit his tongue.

"Although many do not like her," she continued, becoming slightly more animated as she reflected, "I've always found her a rare little piece of chinoiserie. I'd like to take her home, if I had a home, and set her on my mantle, if I had a mantle."

"I've heard that she'd fit right into the Victorian Room at the NAM Galleries," Moore ventured.

"She *was* born during Vicky's reign—and she *was* in her eighties when the cold-bunk was developed—but I can safely say that the matter goes no further."

"And she decided to go gallivanting through Time at that age?"

"Precisely, inasmuch as she wishes to be the immortal arbiter of trans-society."

They turned with the music. Leota had relaxed once more.

"At 110 she's already on her way to becoming an archetype," Moore noted. "Is that one of the reasons interviews are so hard to come by?"

"One of the reasons…" she told him. "If, for example, you were to petition Party Set now, you would still have to wait until next summer for the interview—provided you reached that stage."

"How many are there on the roster of eligibles?"

She shut her eyes.

"I don't know. Thousands, I should say. She'll only see a few dozen, of course. The others will have been weeded out, pruned off, investigated away, and variously disqualified by the directors. Then, naturally, *she* will have the final say as to who is *in*."

Suddenly green and limpid—as the music, the lights, the ultrasonics, and the delicate narcotic fragrances of the air altered subtly—the room became a dark, cool place at the bottom of the sea, heady and nostalgic as the mind of a mermaid staring upon the ruins of Atlantis. The elegiac genius of the hall drew them closer together by a kind of subtle gravitation, and she was cool and adhesive as he continued:

"What is her power, really? I've read the tapes, I know she's a big stockholder, but so what? Why can't the directors vote around her? If I paid out—"

"They *wouldn't,*" she said. "Her money means nothing. She is an institution.

"Hers is the quality of exclusiveness which keeps the Set the Set," she went on. "Imitators will always fail because they lack her discrimination. They'll take in any boorish body who'll pay. That is the reason that People Who Count" (she pronounced the capitals) "will neither attend nor sponsor any but Set functions. All exclusiveness would vanish from the earth if the Set lowered its standards."

"Money is money," said Moore. "If others paid the same for their parties…"

"…Then the People who take their money would cease to Count. The Set would boycott them. They would lose their élan, be looked upon as hucksters."

"It sounds like a rather vicious moebius."

"It is a caste system with checks and balances. Nobody really wants it to break down."

"Even those who wash out?"

"Silly! They'd be the last. There's nothing to stop them from buying their own bunkers, if they can afford it, and waiting another five years to try again. They'd be wealthier anyhow for the wait, if they invest properly. Some have waited decades, and are still waiting. Some have made it after years of persisting. It makes the game more interesting, the achievement more satisfying. In a world of physical ease, brutal social equality, and reasonable economic equality, exclusiveness in frivolity becomes the most sought-after of all distinctions."

" 'Commodities'," he corrected.

"No," she stated, "it is not for sale. Try buying it if money is all you have to offer."

That brought his mind back to more immediate considerations.

"What *is* the cost, if all the other qualifications are met?"

"The rule on that is sufficiently malleable to permit an otherwise qualified person to meet his dues. He guarantees his tenure, bunk-wise or Party-wise, until such a time as his income offsets his debt. So if he only possesses a modest fortune, he may still be quite eligible. This is necessary if we are to preserve our democratic ideals."

She looked away, looked back.

"Usually a step-scale of percentages on the returns from his investments is arranged. In fact, a Set counselor will be right there when you liquidate your assets, and he'll recommend the best conversions."

"Set must clean up on this."

"Certainement. It *is* a business, and the Parties don't come cheaply. But then, you'd be a part of Set yourself—being a shareholder is one of the membership requirements—and we're a restricted corporation, paying high dividends. Your principal will grow. If you were to be accepted, join, and then quit after even one subjective month, something like twenty actual years would have passed. You'd be a month older and much wealthier when you leave—and perhaps somewhat wiser."

"Where do I go to put my name on the list?"

He knew, but he had hopes.

"We can call it in tonight, from here. There is always someone in the office. You will be visited in a week or so, after the preliminary investigation."

"Investigation?"

"Nothing to worry about. Or have you a criminal record, a history of insanity, or a bad credit rating?"

Moore shook his head.

"No, no, and no."

"Then you'll pass."

"But will I actually have a chance of getting in, against all those others?"

It was as though a single drop of rain fell upon his chest.

"Yes," she replied, putting her cheek into the hollow of his neck and staring out over his shoulder so that he could not see her expression, "you'll make it all the way to the lair of Mary Maude Mullen with a member sponsoring you. That final hurdle will depend on yourself."

"Then I'll make it," he told her.

"...The interview may only last seconds. She's quick, her decisions are almost instantaneous, and she's never wrong."

"Then I'll make it," he repeated, exulting.

Above them, the zodiac rippled.

Moore found Darryl Wilson in a barmat in the Poconos. The actor had gone to seed; he was not the man Moore remembered from the award-winning frontier threelie series. That man had been a crag-browed, bushy-faced Viking of the prairies. In four years' time a facial avalanche had occurred, leaving its gaps and runnels across his expensive frown and dusting the face fur a shade lighter. Wilson had left it that way and cauterized his craw with the fire water he had denied the Red Man weekly. Rumor had it he was well into his second liver.

Moore sat beside him and inserted his card into the counter slot. He punched out a Martini and waited. When he noticed that the man was unaware of his presence, he observed, "You're Darryl Wilson and I'm Alvin Moore. I want to ask you something."

The straight-shooting eyes did not focus.

"News media man?"

"No, an old fan of yours," he lied.

"Ask away then," said the still-familiar voice. "You are a camera."

"Mary Maude Mullen, the bitch-goddess of the Set," he said. "What's she like?"

The eyes finally focused.

"You up for deification this session?"

"That's right."

"What do you think?"

Moore waited, but there were no more words, so he finally asked, "About what?"

"Anything. You name it."

Moore took a drink. He decided to play the game if it would make the man more tractable.

"I think I like Martinis," he stated. "Now—"

"Why?"

Moore growled. Perhaps Wilson was too far gone to be of any help. Still, one more try…

"Because they're relaxing and bracing, both at the same time, which is something I need after coming all this way."

"Why do you want to be relaxed and braced?"

"Because I prefer it to being tense and unbraced."

"Why?"

"What the hell is all this?"

"You lose. Go home."

Moore stood.

"Suppose I go out again and come back in and we start over? Okay?"

"Sit down. My wheels turn slowly but they still turn," said Wilson. "We're talking about the same thing. You want to know what Mary Maude is like.—That's what she's like—all interrogatives. Useless ones. Attitudes are a disease that no one's immune to, and they vary so easily in the same person. In two minutes she'll have you stripped down to them, and your answers will depend on biochemistry and the weather. So will her decision. There's nothing I can tell you. She's pure caprice. She's life. She's ugly."

"That's all?"

"She refuses the wrong people. That's enough. Go away."

Moore finished his Martini and went away.

That winter Moore made a fortune. A modest one, to be sure.

He quit his job for a position with the Akwa Mining Research Lab, Oahu Division. It added ten minutes to his commuting time, but the title, Processing Director, sounded better than Assistant Division Chief, and he was anxious for a new sound. He did not slacken the pace of his force-fed social acceptability program, and one of its results was a January lawsuit.

The Set, he had been advised, preferred divorced male candidates to the perpetually single sort. For this reason, he had consulted a highly-rated firm of marriage contractors and entered into a three-month renewable, single partner drop-option contract, with Diane Demetrios, an unemployed model of Greek-Lebanese extraction.

One of the problems of modeling, he decided later, was that there were too many surgically-perfected female eidolons in the labor force; it was a rough profession in which to stay employed. His newly-acquired status had been sufficient inducement to cause Diane to press a breach of promise suit on the basis of an alleged oral agreement that the option would be renewed.

Burgess Social Contracting Services of course sent a properly obsequious adjuster, and they paid the court costs as well as the medfees for Moore's broken nose. (Diane had hit him with *The Essentials of Dress Display,* a heavy, illustrated talisman of a manual, which she carried about in a plastic case—as he slept beside their pool—plastic case and all.)

So, by the month of March Moore felt ready and wise and capable of facing down the last remaining citizen of the nineteenth century.

By May, though, he was beginning to feel he had over-trained. He was tempted to take a month's psychiatric leave from his work, but he recalled Leota's question about a history of insanity. He vetoed the notion and thought of Leota. The world stood still as his mind turned. Guiltily, he realized that he had not thought of her for months. He had been too busy with his autodidactics, his new job, and Diane Demetrios to think of the Setqueen, his love.

He chuckled.

Vanity, he decided, I want her because everyone wants her.

No, that wasn't true either, exactly...He wanted—what?

He thought upon his motives.

He realized, then, that his goals had shifted; the act had become the actor. What he really wanted, first and foremost, impure and unsimple, was an in to the Set—that century-spanning stratocruiser, luxury class, jetting across tomorrow and tomorrow and all the days that followed after—to ride high, like those gods of old who appeared at the rites of the equinoxes, slept between precessions, and were remanifest with each new season, the bulk of humanity living through all those dreary days that lay between. To be a part of Leota was to be a part of the Set, and that was what he wanted now. So of course it was vanity. It was love.

He laughed aloud. His auto-surf initialed the blue lens of the Pacific like a manned diamond, casting the sharp cold chips of its surface up and into his face.

Returning from absolute zero, Lazarus-like, is neither painful nor disconcerting, at first. There are no sensations at all until one achieves the temperature of a reasonably warm corpse. By that time, though, an injection of nirvana flows within the body's thawed rivers.

It is only when consciousness begins to return, thought Mrs. Mullen, to return with sufficient strength so that one fully realizes what has occurred—that the wine has survived another season in an uncertain cellar, its vintage grown rarer still—only then does an unpronounceable fear enter into the mundane outlines of the bedroom furniture—for a moment.

It is more a superstitious attitude than anything, a mental quaking at the possibility that the stuff of life, one's own life, has in some indefinable way been tampered with. A micro-second passes, and then only the dim recollection of a bad dream remains.

She shivered, as though the cold was still locked within her bones, and she shook off the notion of nightmares past.

She turned her attention to the man in the white coat who stood at her elbow.

"What day is it?" she asked him.

He was a handful of dust in the winds of Time...

"August eighteen, two thousand-two," answered the handful of dust. "How do you feel?"

"Excellent, thank you," she decided. "I've just touched upon a new century—this makes three I've visited—so why shouldn't I feel excellent? I intend to visit many more."

"I'm sure you will, madam."

The small maps of her hands adjusted the counterpane. She raised her head.

"Tell me what is new in the world."

The doctor looked away from the sudden acetylene burst behind her eyes.

"We have finally visited Neptune and Pluto," he narrated. "They are quite uninhabitable. It appears that man is alone in the solar system. The Lake Sahara project has run into more difficulties, but it seems that work may begin next spring now that those stupid French claims are near settlement..." Her eyes fused his dust to planes of glass.

"Another competitor, Future-time Gay, entered into the time-tank business three years ago," he recited, trying to smile, "but we met the enemy and they are ours—Set bought them out eight months ago. By the way, our own bunkers are now much more sophistica—"

"I repeat," she said, "what is new in the world, doctor?"

He shook his head, avoiding the look she gave him.

"We can lengthen the remissions now," he finally told her, "quite a time beyond what could be achieved by the older methods."

"A better delaying action?"

"Yes."

"But not a cure?"

He shook his head.

"In my case," she told him, "it has already been abnormally delayed. The older nostrums have already worn thin. For how long are the new ones good?"

"We still don't know. You have an unusual variety of M.S. and it's complicated by other things."

"Does a cure seem any nearer?"

"It could take another twenty years. We might have one tomorrow."

"I see." The brightness subsided. "You may leave now, young man. Turn on my advice tape as you go."

He was glad to let the machine take over.

Diane Demetrios dialed the library and requested the Setbook. She twirled the page-dial and stopped.

She studied the screen as though it were a mirror, her face undergoing a variety of expressions.

"I look just as good," she decided after a time. "Better, even.—Your nose could be changed, and your browline...

"If they weren't facial fundamentalists," she told the picture, "against surgery, lady—you'd be here and I'd be there.

"Bitch!"

The millionth barrel of converted seawater emerged, fresh and icy, from the Moore Purifier. Splashing from its chamber-tandem and flowing through the conduits, it was clean, useful, and singularly unaware of these virtues. Another transfusion of briny Pacific entered at the other end.

The waste products were used in pseudoceramicware.

The man who designed the doubleduty Purifier was rich.

The temperature was 82° in Oahu.

The million-first barrel splashed forth…

They left Alvin Moore surrounded by china dogs.

Two of the walls were shelved, floor to ceiling. The shelves were lined with blue, green, pink, russet (not to mention ocher, vermilion, mauve and saffron) dogs, mainly glazed (although some were dry-rubbed primitives), ranging from the size of a largish cockroach up to that of a pigmy warthog. Across the room a veritable hades of a wood fire roared its metaphysical challenge into the hot July of Bermuda.

Set above it was a mantlepiece bearing more dogs.

Set beside the hellplace was a desk, at which was seated Mary Maude Mullen, wrapped in a green and black tartan. She studied Moore's file, which lay opened on the blotter. When she spoke to him she did not look up.

Moore stood beside the chair which had not been offered him and pretended to study the dogs and the heaps of Georgian kindling that filled the room to overflowing.

While not overly fond of live dogs, Moore bore them no malice. But when he closed his eyes for a moment he experienced a feeling of claustrophobia.

These were not dogs. These were the unblinking aliens staring through the bars of the last Earthman's cage. Moore promised himself that he would say nothing complimentary about that garish rainbow of a houndpack (fit, perhaps, for stalking a jade stag the size of a Chihuahua); he decided it could only have sprung from the mental crock of a monomaniac, or one possessed of a very feeble imagination and small respect for dogs.

After verifying all the generalities listed on his petition, Mrs. Mullen raised her pale eyes to his.

"How do you like my doggies?" he asked him.

She sat there, a narrow-faced, wrinkled woman with flaming hair, a snub nose, an innocent expression, and the lingering twist of the question quirking her thin lips.

Moore quickly played back his last thoughts and decided to maintain his integrity in regards china dogs by answering objectively.

"They're quite colorful," he noted.

This was the wrong answer, he felt, as soon as he said it. The question had been too abrupt. He had entered the study ready to lie about anything but china dogs. So he smiled.

"There are a dreadful lot of them about. But of course they don't bark or bite or shed, or do other things..."

She smiled back.

"My dear little, colorful little collection of canines," she said. "They don't do anything. They're sort of symbolic. That's why I collect them too.

"Sit down," she gestured, "and pretend you're comfortable."

"Thanks."

"It says here that you rose only recently from the happy ranks of anonymity to achieve some sort of esoteric distinction in the sciences. Why do you wish to resign it now?"

"I wanted money and prestige, both of which I was given to understand would be helpful to a Set candidate."

"Aha! Then they were a means rather than an end?"

"That is correct."

"Then tell me why you want to join the Set."

He had written out the answer to that one months ago. It had been bakeovened into his brain, so that he could speak it with natural inflections. The words began forming themselves in his throat, but he let them die there. He had planned them for what he had thought would be maximum appeal to a fan of Tennyson's. Now he was not so sure.

Still... He broke down the argument and picked a neutral point—the part about following knowledge like a sinking star.

"There will be a lot of changes over the next several decades. I'd like to see them with a young man's eyes."

"As a member of the Set you will exist more to be seen than to see," she replied, making a note in his file. "...And I think we'll have to dye your hair if we accept you."

"The hell you say!—Pardon me, that slipped out."

"Good." She made another note. "We can't have them too inhibited—nor too uninhibited, for that matter. Your reaction was rather quaint." She looked up again.

"Why do you want so badly to see the future?"

He felt uneasy. It seemed as though she knew he was lying.

"Plain human curiosity," he answered weakly, "as well as some professional interest. Being an engineer—"

"We're not running a seminar," she observed. "You'd not be wasting much time outside of attending Parties if you wanted to last very long with the Set. In twenty years—no, ten—you'll be back in kindergarten so far as engineering is concerned. It will all be hieroglyphics to you. You don't read hieroglyphics, do you?"

He shook his head.

"Good," she continued. "I hate an inept comparison.—Yes, it will all be hieroglyphics, and if you should leave the Set you would be an unskilled draftsman—not that you'd have need to work. But if you were to want to work, you would have to be self-employed—which grows more and more difficult, almost too difficult to attempt, as time moves on. You would doubtless lose money."

He shrugged and raised his palms. He *had been thinking* of doing that. Fifty years, he had told himself, and we could kick the Set, be rich, and I could take refresher courses and try for a consultantship in marine engineering.

"I'd know enough to appreciate things, even if I couldn't participate," he explained.

"You'd be satisfied just to observe?"

"I think so," he lied.

"I doubt it." Her eyes nailed him again. "Do you think you are in love with Leota Mason? She nominated you, but of course that is her privilege."

"I don't know. I thought so at first, two years ago..."

"Infatuation is fine," she told him. "It makes for good gossip. Love, on the other hand, I will not tolerate. Purge yourself of such notions. Nothing is so boring and ungay as a Set affair. It does not make for gossip, it makes for snickers.

"So is it infatuation or love?"

"Infatuation," he decided.

She glanced into the fire, glanced at her hands.

"You will have to develop a Buddhist's attitude toward the world around you. That world will change from day to day. Whenever you stop to look at it, it will be a different world—unreal."

He nodded.

"Therefore, if you are to maintain your stability, the Set must be the center of all things. Wherever your heart lies, there also shall reside your soul.

"...And if you should happen not to like the future, whenever you do stop to take a look at it, remember, you cannot come back. Don't just think about that, *feel* it!"

He felt it.

She began jotting. Her right hand began suddenly to tremble. She dropped the pen and too carefully drew her hand back within the shawl.

"You are not so colorful as most candidates," she told him, too naturally, "but then, we're short on the soulful type at present. Contrast adds depth and texture to our displays. Go view all the tapes of our past Parties."

"I already have."

"...And you can give your soul to that, or a significant part thereof?"

"Wherever my heart lies..."

"In that case, you may return your lodgings, Mister Moore. You will receive our decision today."

Moore stood. There were so many questions he had not been asked, so many things he had wanted to say, had forgotten, or had not had opportunity to say... Had she already decided to reject him? he wondered. Was that why the interview had been so brief? Still, her final remarks had been encouraging.

He escaped from the fragile kennel, all his pores feeling like fresh nail holes.

He lolled about the hotel pool all afternoon, and in the evening he moved into the bar. He did not eat dinner.

When he received the news that he had been accepted, he was also informed by the messenger that a small gift to his inquisitor was a thing of custom. Moore laughed drunkenly, foreseeing the nature of the gift.

Mary Maude Mullen received her first Pacificware dog from Oahu with a small, sad shrug that almost turned to a shudder. She began to tremble then, nearly dropping it from her fingers. Quickly she placed it on the bottommost shelf behind her desk and reached for her pills; later, the flames caused it to crack.

They were dancing. The sea was an evergreengold sky above the dome. The day was strangely young.

Tired remnants of the Party's sixteen hours, they clung to one another, feet aching, shoulders sloped. There were eight couples still moving on the floor, and the weary musicians fed them the slowest music they could make. Sprawled at the edges of the world, where the green bowl of the sky joined with the blue tiles of the earth, some five hundred people, garments loosened, mouths opened, stared like goldfish on a tabletop at the water behind the wall.

"Think it'll rain?" he asked her.

"Yes," she answered.

"So do I. So much for the weather. Now, about that week on the moon—?"

"What's wrong with good old mother Earth?" she smiled.

Someone screamed. The sound of a slap occurred almost simultaneously. The screaming stopped.

"I've never been to the moon," he replied.

She seemed faintly amused.

"I have. I don't like it."

"Why?"

"It's the cold, crazy lights outside the dome," she said, "and the dark, dead rocks everywhere around the dome," she winced. "They make it seem like a cemetery at the end of Time…"

"Okay," he said, "forget it."

"…And the feeling of disembodied lightness as you move about inside the dome—"

"All right!"

"I'm sorry." She brushed his neck with her lips. He touched her forehead with his. "The Set has lost its shellac," she smiled.

"We're not on tape anymore. It doesn't matter now."

A woman began sobbing somewhere near the giant seahorse that had been the refreshment table. The musicians played more loudly. The sky was full of luminescent starfish, swimming moistly on their tractor beams. One of the starfish dripped salty water on them as it passed overhead.

"We'll leave tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow," she said.

"How about Spain?" he said. "This is the season of the sherries. There'll be the Juegos Florales de la Vendimia Jerezana. It may be the last."

"Too noisy," she said, "with all those fireworks."

"But gay."

"Gay," she sighed with a crooked mouth. "Let's go to Switzerland and pretend we're old, or dying of something romantic."

"Necrophilist," he grinned, slipping on a patch of moisture and regaining his balance. "Better it be a quiet loch in the Highlands, where you can have your fog and miasma and I can have my milk and honeydew unblended."

"Nay," she said, above a quick babble of drunken voices, "let's go to New Hampshire."

"What's wrong with Scotland?"

"I've never been to New Hampshire."

"I have, and I don't like it. It looks like your description of the moon."

A moth brushing against a candle flame, the tremor.

The frozen bolt of black lightning lengthened slowly in the green heavens. A sprinkling of soft rain began.

As she kicked off her shoes he reached out for the glass on the floating tray above his left shoulder. He drained it and replaced it.

"Tastes like someone's watering the drinks."

"Set must be economizing," he said.

Moore saw Unger then, glass in hand, standing at the edge of he floor watching them.

"I see Unger."

"So do I. He's swaying."

"So are we," he laughed.

The fat bard's hair was a snowy chaos and his left eye was swollen nearly shut. He collapsed with a bubbling murmur, spilling his drink. No one moved to help him.

"I believe he's overindulged himself again."

"Alas, poor Unger," she said without expression, "I knew him well."

The rain continued to fall and the dancers moved about the floor like the figures in some amateur puppet show.

"They're coming!" cried a non-Setman, crimson cloak flapping. "They're coming down!"

The water streamed into their eyes as every conscious head in the Party Dome was turned upward. Three silver zeppelins grew in the cloudless green.

"They're coming for us," observed Moore.

"They're going to make it!"

The music had paused momentarily, like a pendulum at the end of its arc. It began again.

Good night, ladies, played the band, *good night, ladies…*

"We're going to live!"

"We'll go to Utah," he told her, eyes moist, "where they don't have seaquakes and tidal waves."

Good night, ladies…

"We're going to live!"

She squeezed his hand.

"Merrily we roll along," the voices sang, *"roll along…"*

" 'Roll along,' " she said.

" 'Merrily,' " he answered.

" 'O'er the deep blue sea!' "

A Set-month after the nearest thing to a Set disaster on record (that is to say, in the year of Our Lord and President Cambert 2019, twelve years after the quake), Setman Moore and Leota (née Lachesis) stood outside the Hall of Sleep on Bermuda Island. It was almost morning.

"I believe I love you," he mentioned.

"Fortunately, love does not require an act of faith," she noted, accepting a light for her cigar, "because I don't believe in anything."

"Twenty years ago I saw a lovely woman at a Party and I danced with her."

"Five weeks ago," she amended.

"I wondered then if she would ever consider quitting the Set and going human again, and being heir to mortal ills."

"I have often wondered that myself," she said, "in idle moments. But she won't do it. Not until she is old and ugly."

"That means forever," he smiled sadly.

"You are noble." She blew smoke at the stars, touched the cold wall of the building. "Someday, when people no longer look at her, except for purposes of comparison with some fluffy child of the far future—or when the world's standards of beauty have changed—she'll transfer from the express run to the local and let the rest of the world go by."

"Whatever the station, she will be all alone in a strange town," said Moore. "Every day, it seems, they remodel the world. I met a fraternity brother at that dinner last night—pardon me, last year—and he treated me as if he were my father. His every other word was 'son' or 'boy' or 'kid,' and he wasn't trying to be funny. He was responding to what he saw. My appetite was considerably diminished.

"Do you realize where we're going?" he asked the back of her head as she turned away to look out over the gardens of sleeping flowers. "Away! That's where. We can never go back! The world moves on while we sleep."

"Refreshing, isn't it?" she finally said. "And stimulating, and awe-inspiring. Not being bound, I mean. Everything burning. Us remaining. Neither time nor space can hold us, unless we consent.

"And I do not consent to being bound," she declared.

"To anything?"

"To anything."

"Supposing it's all a big joke."

"What?"

"The world.—Supposing every man, woman, and child died last year in an invasion by creatures from Alpha Centauri, everyone but the frozen Set. Supposing it was a totally effective virus attack…"

"There are no creatures in the Centauri System."

"Okay, someplace else then. Supposing all the remains and all the traces of chaos were cleaned up, and then one creature gestured with a flipper at this building." Moore slapped the wall. "The creature said: 'Hey! There are some live ones inside, on ice. Ask one of the sociologists whether they're worth keeping, or if we should open the refrigerator door and let them spoil.' Then one of the sociologists came and looked at us, all in our coffins of ice, and *he* said: 'They might be worth a few laughs and a dozen pages in an obscure periodical. So let's fool them into thinking that everything is going on just as it was before the invasion. All their movements, according to these schedules, are preplanned, so it shouldn't be too difficult. We'll fill their Parties with human simulacra packed with recording machinery and we'll itemize their behavior patterns. We'll vary their circumstances and they'll attribute it to progress. We can watch them perform in all sorts of situations that way. Then, when we're finished, we can always break their bunk-timers and let them sleep on—or open their doors and watch them spoil.'

"So they agreed to do it," finished Moore, "and here we are, the last people alive on Earth, cavorting before machines operated by inhuman creatures who are watching us for incomprehensible reasons."

"Then we'll give them a good show," she replied, "and maybe they'll applaud us once before we spoil."

She snubbed out her cigar and kissed him good night. They returned to their refrigerators.

It was twelve weeks before Moore felt the need for a rest from the Party circuit. He was beginning to grow fearful. Leota had spent non-functional decades of her time vacationing with him, and she had recently been showing signs of sullenness, apparently regretting these expenditures on his behalf. So he decided to see something real, to take a stroll in the year 2078. After all, he was over a hundred years old.

The Queen Will Live Forever, said the faded clipping that hung in the main corridor of the Hall of Sleep. Beneath the bannerline was the old/recent story of the conquest of the final remaining problems of Multiple Sclerosis, and the medical ransom of one of its most notable victims. Moore had not seen the Doyenne since the day of his interview. He did not care whether he ever saw her again.

He donned a suit from his casualwear stylelocker and strolled through the gardens and out to the airfield. There were no people about.

He did not really know where he wanted to go until he stood before a ticket booth and the speaker asked him, "Destination, please."

"Uh—Oahu. Akwa Labs, if they have a landing field of their own."

"Yes, they do. That will have to be a private charter though, for the final fifty-six miles—"

"Give me a private charter all the way, both ways."

"Insert your card, please."

He did.

After five seconds the card popped back into his waiting hand. He dropped it into his pocket.

"What time will I arrive?" he asked.

"Nine hundred thirty-two, if you leave on Dart Nine six minutes from now. Have you any luggage?"

"No."

"In that case, your Dart awaits you in area A-11."

Moore crossed the field to the VTO Dart numbered Nine. It flew by tape. The flight pattern, since it was a specially chartered run, had been worked out back at the booth, within milli-seconds of Moore's naming his destination. It was then broadcast-transferred to a blank tape inside Dart Nine; an auto-alternation brain permitted the Dart to correct its course in the face of unforeseen contingencies and later recorrect itself, landing precisely where it was scheduled to come down.

Moore mounted the ramp and stopped to slip his card into the slot beside the hatchway. The hatch swung open and he collected his card and entered. He selected a seat beside a port and snapped its belt about his middle. At this, the hatchway swung itself shut.

There was a brief dialogue in machinetalk, fore and aft, and the Dart lifted into the sky.

After a few minutes the belt unfastened itself and vanished into the arms of his seat. The Dart was cruising smoothly now.

"Do you wish to have the lights dimmed? Or would you prefer to have them brighter?" asked a voice at his side.

"They're fine just the way they are," he told the invisible entity.

"Would you care for something to eat? Or something to drink?"

"I'll have a Martini."

There was a sliding sound, followed by a muted click. A tiny compartment opened in the wall beside him. His Martini rested within.

He removed it and took a sip.

Beyond the port and toward the rear of the Dart, a faint blue nimbus arose from the side-plates.

"Would you care for anything else?" *Pause.* "Shall I read you an article on the subject of your choice?" *Pause.* "Or fiction?" *Pause.* "Or poetry?" *Pause.* "Would you care to view the catalog?" *Pause.* "Or perhaps you would prefer music?"

"Poetry?" repeated Moore.

"Yes, I have many of—"

"I know a poet," he remembered. "Have you anything by Wayne Unger?"

There followed a brief mechanical meditation, then:

"Wayne Unger. Yes," answered the voice. "On call are his *Paradise Unwanted, Fungi of Steel,* and *Chisel in the Sky.*"

"Which is his most recent?"

"*Chisel in the Sky* is the one."

"Read it to me."

The voice began by reading him all the publishing data and copyright information. To Moore's protests it answered that it was a matter of law and cited a precedent case. Moore asked for another Martini and waited.

Finally, " 'Our Wintered Way Through Evening, and Burning Bushes Along It,' " said the voice.

"Huh?"

"That is the title of the first poem."

"Oh, read on."

" '(Where only the evergreens whiten...)
Winterflakes ashes heighten
in towers of blizzard.
Silhouettes unseal an outline.
Darkness, like an absence of faces,
pours from the opened home;
it seeps through shattered pine
and flows the fractured maple.
Perhaps it is the essence senescent,
dreamculled from the sleepers,
that soaks upon this road
in weather-born excess.
Or perhaps the great Anti-Life
learns to paint with a vengeance,
to run an icicle down the gargoyle's eye.
For properly speaking, though
no one can confront himself *in toto,*
I see your falling sky, gone gods,
as in a smoke-filled dream
of ancient statues burning,
soundlessly, down to the ground.
(...and never the everwhite's green.)' "

There was a ten-second pause, then: "The next poem is entitled—"

"Wait a minute," asked Moore. "That first one—? Are you programmed to explain anything about it?"

"I am sorry, I am not. That would require a more complicated unit."

"Repeat the copyright data."

"2016, in the North American Union—"

"And it's his most recent work?"

"Yes, he is a member of Party Set and there is generally a lapse of several decades between his books."

"Continue reading."

The machine read on. Moore knew little concerning verse, but he was struck by the continual references to ice and cold, to snow and sleep.

"Stop," he told the machine. "Have you anything of his from before he joined the Set?"

"*Paradise Unwanted* was published in 1981, two years after he became a member. According to its Foreward, however, most of it was written prior to his joining."

"Read it."

Moore listened carefully. It contained little of ice, snow, or sleep. He shrugged at this minor discovery. His seat immediately adjusted and readjusted to the movement.

He barely knew Unger. He did not like his poetry. He did not like most poetry, though.

The reader began another.

" 'In the Dogged House,' " it said.

" 'The heart is a graveyard of crigas,
hid far from the hunter's eye,
where love wears death like enamel
and dogs crawl in to die…' "

Moore smiled as it read the other stanzas. Recognizing its source, he liked that one somewhat better.

"Stop reading," he told the machine.

He ordered a light meal and thought about Unger. He had spoken with him once. When was it?

2017…? Yes, at the Free Workers' Liberation Centennial in the Lenin Palace.

It was rivers of vodka…

Fountains of juices, like inhuman arteries slashed, spurted their bright umbrellas of purple and lemon and green and orange. Jewels to ransom an Emir flashed near many hearts. Their host, Premier Korlov, seemed a happy frost giant in his display.

…In a dance pavilion of polaroid crystal, with the world outside blinking off and on, on and off—like an advertisement, Unger had commented, both elbows resting on the bartop and his foot on the indispensable rail.

His head had swiveled as Moore approached. He was a bleary-eyed albino owl. "Albion Boore, I believe," he had said, extending a hand. "Quo vadis dammit?"

"Grape juice and wadka," said Moore to the unnecessary human standing beside the mix-machine. The uniformed man pressed two buttons and passed the glass across the two feet of frosty mahogany. Moore twitched it toward Unger in a small salute. "A happy Free Workers' Liberation Centennial to you."

"I'll drink to liberation." The poet leaned forward and poked his own combination of buttons. The man in the uniform sniffed audibly.

They drank a drink together.

"They accuse us," Unger's gesture indicated the world at large, "of neither knowing nor caring anything about un-Set things, un-Set people."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, but it might be expanded upon. We're the same way with our fellows. Be honest now, how many Setmen are you acquainted with?"

"Quite a few."

"I didn't ask how many names you knew."

"Well, I talk with them all the time. Our environment is suited to much movement and many words—and we have all the time in the world. How many friends do *you* have?" I asked.

"I just finished one," grunted the poet, leaning forward. "I'm going to mix me another."

Moore didn't feel like being depressed or joked with and he was not sure which category this fell into. He had been living inside a soap bubble since after the ill-starred Davy Jones Party, and he did not want anyone poking sharp things in his direction.

"So, you're your own man. If you're not happy in the Set, leave."

"You're not being a true *tovarisch,"* said Unger, shaking a finger. "There was a time when a man could tell his troubles to bartenders and barfriends. You wouldn't remember, though—those days went out when the nickel-plated barmatics came in. Damn their exotic eyes and scientific mixing!"

Suddenly he punched out three drinks in rapid succession. He slopped them across the dark, shiny surface.

"Taste them! Sip each of them!" he enjoined Moore. "Can't tell them apart without a scorecard, can you?"

"They're dependable that way."

"Dependable? Hell yes! Depend on them to create neurotics. One time a man could buy a beer and bend an ear. All that went out when the dependable mix-machines came in. Now we join a talk-out club or an act-out-myths club and drink in silence—'tis a sign of manic change and most unnatural! Oh, had the Mermaid been such!" he complained in false notes of frenzy. "Or the Bloody Lion of Stepney! What jaded jakes the fellows of Marlowe had been!"

He sagged.

"Aye! Drinking's not what it used to be."

The international language of his belch caused the mix-machine attendant to avert his face, which betrayed a pained expression before he did so.

"So I'll repeat my question," stated Moore, making conversation. "Why do you stay where you're unhappy? You could go open a real bar of your own, if that's what you'd like. It would probably be a success, now that I think of it—people serving drinks and all that."

"Go to! Go to! I shan't say where!" He stared at nothing. "Maybe that's what I'll do someday, though," he reflected, "open a real bar…"

Moore turned his back to him then, to watch Leota dancing with Korlov. He was happy.

"People join the Set for a variety of reasons," Unger was muttering, "but the main one is exhibitionism, with the titillating wraith of immortality lurking at the stage door, perhaps. Attracting attention to oneself gets harder and harder as time goes on. It's almost impossible in the sciences. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries you could still name great names—now it's great research teams. The arts have been democratized out of existence—and where have all the audiences gone? I don't mean spectators either.

"So we have the Set," he continued. "Take our sleeping beauty there, dancing with Korlov—"

"Huh?"

"Pardon me, I didn't mean to awaken you abruptly. I was saying that if she wanted attention Miss Mason couldn't be a stripper today, so she had to join the Set. It's even better than being a threelie star, and it requires less work—"

"Stripper?" Moore queried.

"A folk artist who undressed to music."

"Yes, I recall hearing of them."

"That's gone too, though," sighed Unger, "and while I cannot disapprove of the present customs of dress and undress, It still seems to me as if something bright and frail died in the elder world."

"She *is* bright, isn't she?"

"Decidedly so."

They had taken a short walk then, outside, in the cold night of Moscow. Moore did not really want to leave, but he had had enough to drink so that he was easy to persuade. Besides that, he did not want the stumbling babbler at his side to fall into an excavation or wander off lost, to miss his flight or turn up injured. So they shuffled up bright avenues and down dim streets until they came to the Square. They stopped before a large, dilapidated monument. The poet broke a small limb from a shrub and bent it into a wreath. He tossed it against the wall.

"Poor fellow," he muttered.

"Who?"

"The guy inside."

"Who's that?"

Unger cocked his head at him.

"You really don't know?"

"I admit there are gaps in my education, if that's what you mean. I continually strive to fill them, but I always was weak on history. I specialized at an early age."

Unger jerked his thumb at the monument.

"Noble Macbeth lies in state within," he said. "He was an ancient king who slew his predecessor, noble Duncan, most heinously. Lots of other people too. When he took the throne he promised he'd be nice to his subjects, though. But the Slavic temperament is a strange thing. He is best remembered for his many fine speeches, which were translated by a man named Pasternak. Nobody reads them anymore."

Unger sighed and seated himself on a stair. Moore joined him. He was too cold to be insulted by the arrogant mocking of the drunken poet.

"Back then, people used to fight wars," said Unger.

"I know," responded Moore, his fingers freezing. "Napoleon once burnt part of this city."

Unger tipped his hat.

Moore scanned the skyline. A bewildering range of structures hedged the Square—here, bright and functional, a ladder-like office building composed its heights and witnessed distances, as only the planned vantages of the very new can manage; there, was now a dark mirror, a place a daytime aquarium of an agency where the confidence-inspiring efficiencies of rehearsed officials were displayed before the onlooker; and across the Square, its purged youth fully restored by shadow, a deserted onion of a cupola poked its sharp topknot after soaring vehicles, a number of which, scuttling among the star fires, were indicated even now—and Moore blew upon his fingers and jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Yes, nations went to war," Unger was saying. "Artilleries thundered. Blood was spilled. People died. But we lived through it, crossing a shaky Shinvat word by word. Then one day there it was. Peace. It had been that way a long time before anyone noticed. We still don't know how we did it. Perpetual postponement and a short memory, I guess, as man's attention became occupied twenty-four hours a day with other things. Now there is nothing left to fight over, and everyone is showing off the fruits of peace—because everyone has some, by the roomful. All they want. More. These things that fill the rooms, though," he mused, "and the mind—how they have proliferated! Each month's version is better than the last, in some hypersophisticated manner. They seem to have absorbed the minds that are absorbed with them…"

"We could all go live in the woods," said Moore, wishing he had taken the time to pocket a battery crystal and a thermostat for his suit.

"We could do lots of things, and we will, eventually—I suppose. Still, I guess we *could* wind up in the woods, at that."

"In that case, let's go back to the Palace while there's still time. I'm frozen."

"Why not?"

They climbed to their feet, began walking back.

"Why *did* you join the Set anyhow? So you could be discontent over the centuries?"

"Nay, son." The poet clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm an audience in search of an entertainment."

It took Moore an hour to get the chill out of his bones.

"Ahem. Ahem," said the voice. "We are about to land at Akwa Labs, Oahu."

The belt snaked out into Moore's lap. He snapped it tight.

A sudden feeling prompted him to ask: "Read me that last poem from *Chisel* again."

" 'Future Be Not Impatient,' " stated the voice:

" 'Someday, perhaps, but not this day.
Sometime; but then, not now.
Man is a monument-making mammal.
Never ask me how.' "

He thought of Leota's description of the moon and he hated Unger for the forty-four seconds it took him to disembark. He was not certain why.

He stood beside Dart Nine and watched the approach of a small man wearing a smile and gay tropical clothing. He shook hands automatically.

"...Very pleased," the man named Teng was saying, "and glad there's not much around for you to recognize anymore. We've been deciding what to show you ever since Bermuda called."

Moore pretended to be aware of the call.

"...Not many people remember their employers from as far back as you do," Teng was saying.

Moore smiled and fell into step with him, heading toward the Processing Complex.

"Yes, I was curious," he agreed, "to see what it all looks like now. My old office, my lab—"

"Gone, of course."

"...our first chamber-tandem, with its big-nozzled injectors—"

"Replaced, naturally."

"Naturally.—And the big old pumps..."

"Shiny and new."

Moore brightened. The sun, which he had not seen for several days/years, felt good on his back, but the air conditioning felt even better as they entered the first building. There was something of beauty in the pure functional compactness of everything about them, something Unger might have called by a different name, he realized, but it was beauty to Moore. He ran his hand along the sides of the units he did not have time to study. He tapped the conduits and peered into the kilns which processed the byproduct ceramicware; he nodded approval and paused to relight his pipe whenever the man at his side asked his opinion of something too technically remote for him to have any opinion.

They crossed catwalks, moved through the temple-like innards of shutdown tanks, traversed alleyways where the silent, blinking panels indicated that unseen operations were in progress. Occasionally they met a worker, seated before a sleeping trouble-board, watching a broadcast entertainment or reading something over his portable threelie. Moore shook hands and forgot names.

Processing Director Teng could not help but be partly hypnotized—both by Moore's youthful appearance and the knowledge that he had developed a key process at some past date (as well as by his apparent understanding of present operations)—into believing that he was an engineer of his own breed, and up-to-date in his education. Actually, Mary Mullen's prediction that his profession would some day move beyond the range of his comprehension had not yet come to pass—but he could see that it was the direction in which he was headed. Appropriately, he had noticed his photo gathering dust in a small lobby, amid those of Teng's other dead and retired predecessors.

Sensing this feeling, Moore asked, "Say, do you think I could have my old job back?"

The man's head jerked about. Moore remained expressionless.

"Well—I suppose—something—could be worked…" he ended lamely as Moore broke into a grin and twisted the question back into casual conversation. It was somehow amusing to have produced that sudden, strange look of realization on the man's bored face, as he actually *saw* Moore for the first time. Frightening, too.

"Yes, seeing all this progress is—inspiring," Moore pronounced. "It's almost enough to make a man want to work again.—Glad I don't have to, of course. But there's a bit of nostalgia involved in coming back after all these years and seeing how this place grew out of the shoestring operation it seemed then—grew into more buildings than I could walk through in a week, and all of them packed with new hardware and working away to beat the band. Smooth. Efficient. I like it. I suppose you like working here?"

"Yes," sighed Teng, "as much as a man can like working. Say, were you planning on staying overnight? There's a weekly employees' luau and you'd be very welcome." He glanced at the wafer of a watchface clinging to his wrist. "In fact, it's already started," he added.

"Thanks," said Moore, "but I have a date and I have to be going. I just wanted to reaffirm my faith in progress. Thanks for the tour, and thanks for your time."

"Any time." Teng steered him toward a lush Break Room. "You won't be wanting to Dart back for awhile yet, will you?" he said. "So while we're having a bite to eat in here I wonder if I could ask you some questions about the Set. Its entrance requirements in particular…"

All the way around the world to Bermuda, getting happily drunk in the belly of Dart Nine, in the year of Our Lord twenty seventy-eight, Moore felt that Time had been put aright.

"So you want to have it./?" said/asked Mary Maude, uncoiling carefully from the caverns of her shawl.

"Yes."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I do not destroy that which belongs to me. I possess so very little as it is."

The Doyenne snorted gently, perhaps in amusement. She tapped her favorite dog, as though seeking a reply from it.

"Though it sails upon a bottomless sea toward some fabulous orient," she mused, "the ship will still attempt to lower an anchor. I do not know why. Can you tell me? Is it simply carelessness on the part of the captain? Or the second mate?"

The dog did not answer. Neither did anything else.

"Or is it a mutineer's desire to turn around and go back?" she inquired. "To return home?"

There was a brief stillness. Finally:

"I live in a succession of homes. They are called hours. Each is lovely."

"But not lovely enough, and never to be revisited, eh? Permit me to anticipate your next words: 'I do not intend to marry. I do not intend to leave the Set. I shall have my child—' By the way, what will it be, a boy or a girl?"

"A girl."

" '—I shall have my daughter. I shall place her in a fine home; arrange her a glorious future, and be back in time for the Spring Festival.' " She rubbed her glazed dog as though it were a crystal and pretended to peer through its greenish opacity. "Am I not a veritable gipsy?" she asked.

"Indeed."

"And you think this will work out?"

"I fail to see why it should not."

"Tell me which her proud father will do," she inquired, "compose her a sonnet sequence, or design her mechanical toys?"

"Neither. He shall never know. He'll be asleep until spring, and I will not. She must never know either."

"So much the worse."

"Why, pray tell?"

"Because she will become a woman in less than two months, by the clocks of the Set—and a lovely woman, I daresay—because she will be able to afford loveliness."

"Of course."

"And, as the daughter of a member, she will be eminently eligible for Set candidacy."

"She may not want it."

"Only those who cannot achieve it allude to having those sentiments. No, she'll want it. Everyone does. —And, if her beauty should be surgically obtained, I believe that I shall, in this instance, alter a rule of mine. I shall pass on her and admit her to the Set. She will then meet many interesting people—poets, engineers, her mother…"

"No! I'd tell her, before I'd permit that to happen!"

"Aha! Tell me, is your fear of incest predicated upon your fear of competition, or is it really the other way around?"

"Please! Why are you saying these horrible things?"

"Because, unfortunately, you are something I can no longer afford to keep around. You have been an excellent symbol for a long time, but now your pleasures have ceased to be Olympian. Yours is a lapse into the mundane. You show that the gods are less sophisticated than schoolchildren—that they can be victimized by biology, despite the oceans of medical allies at our command. Princess, in the eyes of the world you are my daughter, for I am the Set. So take some motherly advice and retire. Do not attempt to renew your option. Get married first, and then to sleep for a few months—till spring, when your option is up. Sleep intermittently in the bunker, so that a year or so will pass. We'll play up the romantic aspect of your retirement. Wait a year or two to bear your child. The cold sleep won't do her any harm; there have been other cases such as yours. If you fail to agree to this, our motherly admonition is that you face present expulsion."

"You *can't!*"

"Read your contract."

"But no one need ever know!"

"You silly little dollface!" The acetylene blazed forth. "Your glimpses of the outside have been fragmentary and extremely selective—for at least sixty years. Every news medium in the world watches almost every move every Setman makes, from the time he sits up in his bunker until he retires, exhausted, after the latest Party. Snoopers and newshounds today have more gimmicks and gadgets in their arsenals than your head has colorful hairs. We can't hide your daughter all her life, so we won't even try. We'd have trouble enough concealing matters if you decided not to have her—but I think we could out-bribe and out-drug our own employees.

"Therefore, I call upon you for a decision."

"I am sorry."

"So am I," said the Doyenne.

The girl stood.

From somewhere, as she left, she seemed to hear the whimpering of a china dog.

Beyond the neat hedgerows of the garden and down a purposefully irregular slope ran the unpaved pathway which wandered like an impulsive river, through neck-tickling straits of unkempt forsythia, past high islands of mobbed sumac, and by the shivering branches, like waves, of an occasional ginkgo, wagging at the overhead gulls, while dreaming of the high-flying *Archaeopteryx* about to break through its heart in a dive; and perhaps a thousand feet of twistings are required to negotiate the two hundred feet of planned wilderness that separates the gardens of the Hall of Sleep from the artificial ruins which occupy a full, hilly acre, dotted here and there by incipient jungles of lilac and the occasional bell of a great willow—which momentarily conceal, and then guide the eye on toward broken pediments, smashed friezes, half-standing columns, then faceless, handless statues, and finally, seemingly random heaps of rubble which lay amid these things; here, the path over which they moved then forms a delta and promptly loses itself where the tides of Time chafe away the memento mori quality that the ruins first seem to spell, acting as a temporal entasis in the eye of the beholding Setman, so that he can look upon it all and say, "I am older than this," and his companion can reply, "We will pass again some year and this, too, will be gone" (even though she did not say it this time), feeling happier by feeling the less mortal by so doing; and crossing through the rubble, as they did, to a place where barbarously ruined Pan grins from inside the ring of a dry fountain, a new path is to be located, an unplanned way, where the grass is yellowed underfoot and the walkers must go single file because it leads them through a place of briars, until they reach the old breakwall over which they generally climb like commandos in order to gain access to a quarter mile strand of coved and deserted beach, where the sand is not quite so clean as the beaches of the town—which are generally sifted every third day—but where the shade is as intense, in its own way, as the sunlight, and there are flat rocks offshore for meditation.

"You're getting lazy," he commented, kicking off his shoes and digging his toes into the cool sand. "You didn't climb over."

"I'm getting lazy," she agreed.

They threw off their robes and walked to the water's edge.

"Don't push!"

"Come on. I'll race you to the rocks."

For once he won.

Loafing in the lap of the Atlantic, they could have been any two bathers in any place, in any time.

"I could stay here forever."

"It gets cold nights, and if there's a bad storm you might catch something or get washed away."

"I meant," she amended, "if it could always be like this."

" *'Verweile doch, du bist so schön,'* " he reminded. "Faust lost a bet that way, remember? So would a Sleeper. Unger's got me reading again— Hey! What's the matter?"

"Nothing!"

"There's something wrong, little girl. Even I can tell."

"So what if there is?"

"So a lot, that's what. Tell me."

Her hand bridged the narrow channel between their rocks and found his. He rolled onto his side and stared at her satin-wet hair and her stuck-together eyelashes, the dimpled deserts of her cheeks, and the bloodied oasis of her mouth. She squeezed his hand.

"Let's stay here forever—despite the chill, and being washed away."

"You are indicating that—?"

"We could get off at this stop."

"I suppose. But—"

"But you like it now? You like the big charade?"

He looked away.

"I think you were right," she told him, "that night—many years ago."

"What night?"

"The night you said it was all a joke—that we are the last people alive on Earth, performing before machines operated by inhuman creatures who watch us for incomprehensible purposes. What are we but wave-patterns on an oscilloscope? I'm sick of being an object of contemplation! "

He stared into the sea.

"I'm rather fond of the Set now," he finally responded. "At first I was ambivalent toward it. But a few weeks—years—ago I visited a place where I used to work. It was—different. Bigger. Better run. But more than that, actually. It wasn't just that it was filled with things I couldn't have guessed at fifty or sixty years ago. I had an odd feeling while I was there. I was with a little chatterbox of a Processing Director named Teng, and he was yammering away worse than Unger, and I was just staring at all those tandem-tanks and tiers of machinery that had grown up inside the shell of that first old building—sort of like inside a womb—and I suddenly felt that someday something was going to be born, born of steel and plastic and dancing electrons, in such a stainless, sunless place—and *that* something would be so fine that I would want to be there to see it. I couldn't dignify it by calling it a mystical experience or anything like that. It was just sort of a feeling I had. But if *that* moment could stay forever… Anyhow, the Set is my ticket to a performance I'd like to see."

"Darling," she began, "it is anticipation and recollection that the fill the heart—never the sensation of the moment."

"Perhaps you are right…"

His grip tightened on her hand as the tunnel between their eyes shortened. He leaned across the water and kissed the blood from her mouth.

"Verweile doch…"

"…Du bist so schön."

It was the Party to end all Parties. The surprise announcement of Alvin Moore and Leota Mathilde Mason struck the Christmas Eve gathering of the Set as just the thing for the season. After an extensive dinner and the exchange of bright and costly trifles the lights were dimmed. The giant Christmas tree atop the transparent penthouse blazed like a compressed galaxy through the droplets of melted snow on the ceiling-pane.

It was nine by all the clocks of London.

"Married on Christmas, divorced on Twelfth Night," said someone in the darkness.

"What'll they do for an encore?" whispered someone else.

There were giggles and several off-key carols followed them. The blacklight pickup was doubtless in action.

"Tonight we are quaint," said Moore.

"We danced in Davy Jones' Locker," answered Leota, "while they cringed and were sick on the floor."

"It's not the same Set," he told her, "not really. How many new faces have you counted? How many old ones have vanished? It's hard to tell. Where do old Setmen go?"

"The graveyard of the elephants?" he suggested. "Who knows?"

" 'The heart is a graveyard of crigas,' " recited Moore,
" 'hid far from the hunter's eye,
where love wears death like enamel
and dogs crawl in to die.' "

"That's Unger's, isn't it?" she asked.

"That's right, I just happened to recall it."

"I wish you hadn't. I don't like it."

"Sorry."

"Where is Unger anyway?" she asked as the darkness retreated and the people arose.

"Probably at the punchbowl—or under the table."

"Not this early in the evening—for being under the table, I mean."

Moore shifted.

"What *are* we doing here anyhow?" he wanted to know. "Why did we have to attend this Party?"

"Because it is the season of charity."

"Faith and hope, too," he smirked. "You want to be maudlin or something? All right, I'll be maudlin with you. It *is* a pleasure, really."

He raised her hand to his lips.

"Stop that!"

"All right." He dropped it.

He kissed her on the mouth. There was laughter.

She flushed but did not rise from his side.

"If you want to make a fool of me—of us," he said, "I'll go more than halfway. Tell me why we had to come to this Party and announce our un-Setness before everyone? We could have just faded away from the Parties, slept until spring, and let our options run out."

"No. I am a woman and I could not resist another Party—the last one of the year, the very last—and wear your gift on my finger and know that deep down inside, the others do envy us—our courage, if nothing else—and probably our happiness."

"Okay," he agreed, "I'll drink to it—to you, anyway." He raised his glass and downed it. There was no fireplace to throw it into, so as much as he admired the gesture he placed it back on the table.

"Shall we dance? I hear music."

"Not yet. Let's just sit here and drink."

"Fine."

When all the clocks in London said eleven, Leota wanted to know where Unger was.

"He left," a slim girl with purple hair told her, "right after dinner. Maybe indigestion," she shrugged, "or maybe he went looking for the Globe."

She frowned and took another drink.

Then they danced. Moore did not really see the room through which they moved, nor the other dancers. They were all the featureless characters in a book he had already closed. Only the dance was real—and the woman with whom he was dancing.

Time's friction, he decided, and a raising of the sights. I have what I wanted and still I want more. I'll get over it.

It was a vast hall of mirrors. There were hundreds of Alvin Moores and Leotas (née Mason) dancing. They were dancing at all their Parties of the past seventy-some years—from a Tibetan ski lodge to Davy Jones' Locker, from a New Year's Eve in orbit to the floating Palace of Kanayasha, from a Halloween in the caverns of Carlsbad to a Mayday at Delphi—they had danced everywhere, and tonight was the last Party, *good night, ladies...*

She leaned against him and said nothing and her breath collared his neck.

"Good night, good night, good night," he heard himself saying, and they left with the bells of midnight, early, early, and it was Christmas as they entered the hopcar and told the Set chauffeur that they were returning early.

And they passed over the stratocruiser and settled beside the Dart they had come in, and they crossed through the powdery fleece that lay on the ground and entered the smaller craft.

"Do you wish to have the lights dimmed? Or would you prefer to have them brighter?" asked a voice at their side, after London and its clocks and its Bridges had fallen, down.

"Dim them."

"Would you care for something to eat? Or something to drink?"

"No."

"No."

"Shall I read you an article on the subject of your choice?" *Pause.* "Or fiction?" *Pause.* "Or poetry?" *Pause.* "Would you care to view the catalog?" *Pause.* "Or perhaps you would prefer music?"

"Music," she said. "Soft. Not the kind you listen to."

After about ten minutes of near-sleep, Moore heard the voice:

"Hilted of flame,
our frail phylactic blade
slits black
beneath Polestar's
pinprick comment,
foredging burrs
of mitigated hell,
spilling light without illumination.

"Strands of song,
to share its stinging flight,
are shucked and scraped
to fit an idiot theme.
Here, through outlocked chaos,

climbed of migrant logic,
the forms of black notation
Blackly dice a flame."

"Turn it off," said Moore. "We didn't ask you to read."

"I'm not reading," said the voice, "I'm composing."

"Who—?"

Moore came awake and turned in his seat, which promptly adjusted to the movement. A pair of feet projected over the arm of a double seat to the rear.

"Unger?"

"No, Santa Claus. Ho! Ho!"

"What are you doing going back this early?"

"You just answered your own question, didn't you?"

Moore snorted and settled back once more. At his side, Leota was snoring delicately, her seat collapsed into a couch.

He shut his eyes, but knowing they were not alone he could not regain the peaceful drifting sensation he had formerly achieved. He heard a sigh and the approach of lurching footfalls. He kept his eyes closed, hoping Unger would fall over and go to sleep. He didn't.

Abruptly, his voice rang out, a magnificently dreadful baritone:

"I was down to Saint James' Infir-r-rmary," he sang. "I saw my ba-a-aby there, stretched out on a long whi-i-ite ta-a-ble—so sweet, so cold, so fair—"

Moore swung his left hand, cross-body, at the poet's midsection. He had plenty of target, but he was too slow. Unger blocked his fist and backed away, laughing.

Leota shook herself awake.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Composing," he answered, "myself.

"Merry Christmas," he added.

"Go to hell," answered Moore.

"I congratulate you on your recent nuptials, Mister Moore."

"Thanks."

"Why wasn't I invited?"

"It was a simple ceremony."

He turned.

"Is that true, Leota? An old comrade in arms like me, not invited just because it wasn't showy enough for my elaborate tastes?"

She nodded, fully awake now.

He struck his forehead.

"Oh, I am wounded!"

"Why don't you go back to wherever you came from?" asked Moore. "The drinks are on the house."

"I can't attend midnight mass in an inebriated condition."

Moore's fingers twitched back into fists.

"You may attend a mass for the dead without having to kneel."

"I believe you are hinting that you wish to be alone. I understand."

He withdrew to the rear of the Dart. After a time he began to snore.

"I hope we never see him again," she said.

"Why? He's a harmless drunk."

"No, he isn't. He hates us—because we're happy and he isn't."

"I think he's happiest when he's unhappy," smiled Moore, "and whenever the temperature drops. He loves the cold-bunk because it's like a little death to sleep in it. He once said, 'Each Setman dies many deaths. That's what I like about being a Setman.'

"You say more sleep won't be injurious—" he asked abruptly.

"No, there's no risk."

Below them, Time fled backward through the cold. Christmas was pushed out into the hallway and over the threshold of the front door to their world—Alvin's, Leota's, and Unger's world—to stand shivering on the doorsill of its own Eve, in Bermuda. Inside the Dart, passing backward through Time, Moore recalled that New Year's Eve Party many years ago, recalled his desires of that day and reflected that they sat beside him now; recalled the Parties since then and reflected that he would miss all that were yet to come; recalled his work in the time before Time—a few months ago—and reflected that he could no longer do it properly—and that Time was indeed out of joint and that *he* could not set it aright; he recalled his old apartment, never revisited, all his old friends, including Diane Demetrios, now dead or senile, and reflected that, beyond the Set which he was leaving, he knew no one, save possibly the girl at his side. Only Wayne Unger was ageless, for he was an employee of the eternal. Given a month or two Unger could open a bar, form his own circle of outcasts and toy with a private renaissance, if he should ever decide to leave.

Moore suddenly felt very stale and tired, and he whispered to their ghostly servant for a Martini and reached across his dozing wife to fetch it from the cubicle. He sat there sipping it, wondering about the world below.

He should have kept with life, he decided. He knew nothing of contemporary politics, or law, or art; his standards were those grafted on by the Set, and concerned primarily with color, movement, gaiety, and clever speech; he was reduced again to childhood when it came to science. He knew he was wealthy, but the Set had been managing all his finances. All he had was an all-purpose card, good anywhere in the world for any sort of purchase, commodity or service-wise. Periodically, he had examined his file and seen balance sheets which told him he need never worry about being short of money. But he did not feel confident or competent when it came to meeting the people who resided in the world outside. Perhaps he would appear stodgy, old-fashioned, and "quaint" as he had felt tonight, without the glamor of the Set to mask his humanity.

Unger snored, Leota breathed deeply, and the world turned. When they reached Bermuda they returned to the Earth.

They stood beside the Dart, just outside the flight terminal.

"Care to take a walk?" asked Moore.

"I am tired, my love," said Leota, starting in the direction of the Hall of Sleep. She looked back.

He shook his head. "I'm not quite ready."

She returned to him. He kissed her.

"I'll see you then in April, darling. Good night."

"April is the cruelest month," observed Unger. "Come, engineer. I'll walk with you as far as the shuttle stands."

They began walking. They moved across the roadway in the direction opposite the terminal, and they entered upon the broad, canopied walk that led to the ro-car garage.

It was a crystalline night, with stars like tinsel and a satellite beacon blazing like a gold piece deep within the pool of the sky. As they walked, their breath fumed into white wreaths that vanished before they were fully formed. Moore tried in vain to light his pipe. Finally, he stopped and hunched his shoulders against the wind until he got it going.

"A good night for walking," said Unger.

Moore grunted. A gust of wind lashed a fiery rain of loose tobacco upon his cheek. He smoked on, hands in the pockets of his jacket, collar raised. The poet clapped him on the shoulder.

"Come with me into the town," he suggested. "It's only over the hill. We can walk it."

"No," said Moore, through his teeth.

They strode on, and as they neared the garage Unger grew uneasy.

"I'd rather someone were with me tonight," he said abruptly. "I feel strange, as though I'd drunk the draught of the centuries and suddenly am wise in a time when wisdom is unnecessary. I—I'm afraid."

Moore hesitated.

"No," he finally repeated, "it's time to say good-bye. You're traveling on and we're getting off. Have fun."

Neither offered to shake hands, and Moore watched him move into the shuttle stop.

Continuing behind the building, Moore cut diagonally across the wide lawns and into the garden. He strolled aimlessly for a few minutes, then found the path that led down to the ruins.

The going was slow as he wound his way through the cold wilderness. After a period of near-panic when he felt surrounded by trees and had had to backtrack, he emerged into the starlit clearing where menaces of shrubbery dappled the broken buildings with patterns of darkness, moving restlessly as the winds shifted.

The grass rustled about his ankles as he seated himself on a fallen pillar and got his pipe going once more.

He sat thinking himself into marble as his toes grew numb, and he felt very much a part of the place; an artificial scene, a ruin transplanted out of history onto unfamiliar grounds. He did not want to move. He just wanted to freeze into the landscape and become his own monument. He sat there making pacts with imaginary devils: he wanted to go back, to return with Leota to his Frisco tower, to work again. Like Unger, he suddenly felt wise in a time when wisdom was unnecessary. Knowledge was what he needed. Fear was what he had.

Pushed on by the wind, he picked his way across the plain. Within the circle of his fountain, Pan was either dead or sleeping. Perhaps it is the cold sleep of the gods, decided Moore, and Pan will one day awaken and blow upon his festival pipes and only the wind among high towers will answer, and the shuffling tread of an assessment robot be quickened to scan him—because the Party people will have forgotten the festival melodies, and the waxen ones will have isolated out the wisdom of the blood on their colored slides and inoculated mankind against it—and, programmed against emotions, a frivolity machine will perpetually generate the sensations of gaiety into the fever-dreams of the delirious, so that they will not recognize his tunes—and there shall be none among the children of Phoebus to even repeat the Attic cry of his first passing, heard those many Christmases ago beyond the waters of the Mediterranean.

Moore wished that he had stayed a little longer with Unger, because he now felt that he had gained a glimpse of the man's perspective. It had taken the fear of a new world to generate these feelings, but he was beginning to understand the poet. Why did the man stay on in the Set, though? he wondered. Did he take a masochistic pleasure in seeing his ice-prophecies fulfilled, as he moved further and further away from his own times? Maybe that was it.

Moore stirred himself into one last pilgrimage. He walked along their old path down to the breakwall. The stones were cold beneath his fingers, so he used the stile to cross over to the beach.

He stood on a rim of rust at the star-reflecting bucket-bottom of the world. He stared out at the black humps of the rocks where they had held their sunny colloquy days/months ago. It was his machines he had spoken of then, before they had spoken of themselves. He had believed, still believed, in their inevitable fusion with the spirit of this kind, into greater and finer vessels for life. Now he feared, like Unger, that by the time this occurred something else might have been lost, and that the fine new vessels would only be partly filled, lacking some essential ingredient. He hoped Unger was wrong; he felt that the ups and downs of Time might at some future equinox restore all those drowsing verities of the soul's undersides that he was now feeling—and that there would be ears to hear the piped melody, and feet that would move with its sound. He tried to believe this.

A star fell, and Moore looked at his watch. It was late. He scuffed his way back to the wall and crossed over it again.

Inside the pre-sleep clinic he met Jameson, who was already yawning from his prep-injection. Jameson was a tall, thin man with the hair of a cherub and the eyes of its opposite number.

"Moore," he grinned, watching him hang his jacket on the wall and roll up his sleeve, "you going to spend your honeymoon on ice?"

The hypogun sighed in the medic's husky hand and the prep-injection entered Moore's arm.

"That's right," he replied, leveling his gaze at the not completely sober Jameson. "Why?"

"It just doesn't seem the thing to do," Jameson explained, still grinning. "If I were married to Leota you wouldn't catch me going on ice. Unless—"

Moore took one step toward him, the sound in his throat like a snarl. Jameson drew back, his dark eyes widening.

"I was joking!" he said. "I didn't..."

There was a pain in Moore's injected arm as the big medic seized it and jerked him to a halt.

"Yeah," said Moore, "good night. Sleep tight, wake sober."

As he turned toward the door the medic released his arm. Moore rolled down his sleeve and donned his jacket as he left the room.

"You're off your rocker," Jameson called after him.

Moore had about half an hour before he had to hit his bunker. He did not feel like heading for it at the moment. He had planned on waiting in the clinic until the injection began to work, but Jameson's presence changed that for him.

He walked through the wide corridors of the Hall of Sleep, rode a lift up to the bunkers, then strode down the hallway until he came to his door. He hesitated, then passed on. He would sleep there for the next three and a half months; he did not feel like giving it half of the next hour also.

He refilled his pipe. He would smoke through a sentinel watch beside the ice goddess, his wife. He looked about for wandering medics. One is supposed to refrain from smoking after the prep-injection, but it had never bothered him yet, or anyone else he knew of.

An intermittent thumping sound reached his ears as he moved on up the hallway. It stopped as he rounded a corner, then began again, louder. It was coming from up ahead.

After a moment there was another silence.

He paused outside Leota's door. Grinning around his pipe, he found a pen and drew a line through the last name on her plate. He printed "Moore" in above it. As he was forming the final letter the pounding began again.

It was coming from inside her room.

He opened the door, took a step, then stopped.

The man had his back to him. His right arm was raised. A mallet was clenched in his fist.

His panted mutterings, like an incantation, reached Moore's ears:

" 'Strew on her roses, roses, and never a spray of yew…In quiet she reposes—' "

Moore was across the chamber. He seized the mallet and managed to twist it away. Then he felt something break inside his hand as his fist connected with a jaw. The man collided with the opposite wall, then pitched forward onto the floor.

"Leota!" said Moore.

Cast of white Parian she lay, deep within the coils of the bunker. The canopy had been raised high overhead. Her flesh was already firm as stone—because there was no blood on her breast where the stake had been driven in. Only cracks and fissures, as in stone.

A garland of mistletoe at her throat…

"No," said Moore, in anguish.

The stake was a very hard synthowood—like cocobolo, or quebracho, or perhaps lignum vitae—still to be unsplintered…

"No," said Moore.

Her face had the relaxed expression of a dreamer, her hair was the color of aluminum. His ring was on her finger…

There was a murmuring in the corner of the room.

"Unger," he said flatly, "why—did—you—do it?"

The man sucked air around his words. His eyes were focused on something nameless.

"...Vampire," he muttered, "luring men aboard her Flying Dutchman to drain them across the years...She is the future—a goddess on the outside and a thirsting vacuum within," he stated without emotion. " 'Strew on her roses, roses...Her mirth the world required—She bathed it in smiles of glee...' She was going to leave me way up here in the middle of the air. I can't get off the merry-go-round and I can't have the brass ring. But no one else will lose as I have lost, not now. '...Her life was turning, turning, in mazes of heat and sound—' I thought she would come back to me, after she'd tired of you."

He raised his hand to cover his eyes as Moore advanced.

"To the technician, the future—"

Moore hit him with the hammer, once, twice. After the third blow he lost count because his mind could not conceive of any number greater than three.

Then he was walking, running, the mallet still clutched in his hand—past doors like blind eyes, up corridors, down seldom-used stairwells.

As he lurched away from the Hall of Sleep he heard someone calling after him through the night. He kept running.

After a long while he began to walk again. His hand was aching and his breath burned within his lungs. He climbed a hill, paused at its top, then descended.

Party Town, an expensive resort—owned and sponsored, though seldom patronized, by the Set—was deserted, except for the Christmas lights in the windows, and the tinsel, and the boughs of holly. From some dim adytum the recorded carols of a private celebration could be heard, and some laughter. These things made Moore feel even more alone as he walked up one street and down another, his body seeming ever more a thing apart from him as the prep-injection took its inevitable effect. His feet were leaden. His eyes kept closing and he kept forcing them back open.

There were no services going on when he entered the church. It was warmer inside. He was alone there, too.

The interior of the church was dim, and he was attracted to an array of lights about the display at the foot of a statue. It was a manger scene. He leaned back against a pew and stared at the mother and the child, at the angels and the inquisitive cattle, at the father. Then he made a sound he had no words for and threw the mallet into the little stable and turned away. Clawing at the wall, he staggered off a dozen steps and collapsed, cursing and weeping, until he slept.

They found him at the foot of the cross.

Justice had become a thing of streamlined swiftness since the days of Moore's boyhood. The sheer force of world population had long ago crowded every docket of every court to impossible extremes, until measures were taken to waive as much of the paraphernalia as could be waived and hold court around the clock. That was why Moore faced judgment at ten o'clock in the evening, two days after Christmas

The trial lasted less than a quarter of an hour. Moore waived representation, the charges were read, he entered a plea of guilty, and the judge sentenced him to death in the gas chamber without looking up from the stack of papers on his bench.

Numbly, Moore left the courtroom and was returned to a cell for his final meal, which he did not remember eating. He had no conception of the juridical process in this year in which he had come to rest. The Set attorney had simply looked bored as he told him his story, then mentioned "symbolic penalties" and told him to waive representation and enter a simple plea of "guilty to the homicide as described." He signed a statement to that effect. Then the attorney had left him and Moore had not spoken with anyone but his warders up until the time of the trial, and then only a few words before he went into court. And now—to receive a death sentence after he had admitted he was guilty—guilty of killing his wife's murderer—he could not conceive that justice had been done. Despite this, he felt an unnatural calm as he chewed mechanically upon whatever he had ordered. He was not afraid to die. He could not believe in it.

An hour later they came for him. He was led to a small, airtight room with a single, thick window set high in its metal door. He seated himself upon the bench within it and his gray-uniformed guards slammed the door behind him.

After an interminable time he heard the pellets breaking and he smelled the fumes. They grew stronger.

Finally, he was coughing and breathing fire and gasping and crying out, and he thought of her lying there in her bunker, the ironic strains of Unger's song during their Dart-flight recurring in his mind:

"I was down to Saint James' Infir-r-rmary.
I saw my ba-a-aby there,
Stretched out on a long whi-i-ite ta-a-able—
So sweet, so cold, so fair…"

Had Unger been consciously contemplating her murder even then? he wondered. Or was it something lurking below his consciousness? Something he had felt stirring, so that he had wanted Moore to stay with him—to keep it from happening?

He would never know, he realized, as the fires reached into his skull and consumed his brain.

As he awoke, feeling very weak upon white linen, the voice within his earphones was saying to Alvin Moore: "…Let that be a lesson to you."

Moore tore off the earphones with what he thought was a strong gesture, but his muscles responded weakly. Still, the earphones came off.

He opened his eyes and stared.

He might be in the Set's Sick Ward, or in hell. Franz Andrews, the attorney who had advised him to plead guilty, sat at his bedside.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Oh, great! Care to play a set of tennis?"

The man smiled faintly.

"You have successfully discharged your debt to society," he stated, "through the symbolic penalty procedure."

"Oh, that explains everything," said Moore wryly. Finally: "I don't see why there had to be any penalty, symbolic or otherwise. That rhymer murdered my wife."

"He'll pay for it," said Andrews.

Moore rolled onto his side and studied the dispassionate, flat-featured face at his elbow. The attorney's short hair was somewhere between blond and gray and his gaze unflinchingly sober.

"Do you mind repeating what you just said?"

"Not at all. I said he'd pay for it."

"He's not dead!"

"No, he's quite alive—two floors above us. His head has to heal before he can stand trial. He's too ill to face execution."

"He's alive!" said Moore. "Alive? Then what the hell was *I* executed for?"

"Well, you *did* kill the man," said Andrews, somewhat annoyed. "The fact that the doctors were later able to revive him does not alter the fact that a homicide occurred. The symbolic penalty exists for all such cases. You'll think twice before ever doing it again."

Moore tried to rise. He failed.

"Take it easy. You're going to need several more days of rest before you can get up. Your own revival was only last night."

Moore chuckled weakly. Then he laughed for a long, long time. He stopped, ending with a little sob.

"Feel better now?"

"Sure, sure," he whispered hoarsely. "Like a million bucks, or whatever the crazy currency is these days. What kind of execution will Unger get for murder?"

"Gas," said the attorney, "the same as you, if the alleged—"

"Symbolic, or for keeps?"

"Symbolic, of course."

Moore did not remember what happened next, except that he heard someone screaming and there was suddenly a medic whom he had not noticed doing something to his arm. He heard the soft hiss of an injection. Then he slept.

When he awakened he felt stronger and he noticed an insolent bar of sunlight streaking the wall opposite him. Andrews appeared not to have moved from his side.

He stared at the man and said nothing.

"I have been advised," said the attorney, "of your lack of knowledge concerning the present state of the law in these matters. I did not stop to consider the length of your membership in the Set. These things so seldom occur—in fact, this is the first such case I've ever handled—that I simply assumed you knew what a symbolic penalty was when I spoke with you back in your cell. I apologize."

Moore nodded.

"Also," he continued, "I assumed that you had considered the circumstances under which Mister Unger allegedly committed a homicide—"

" 'Allegedly' hell! I was there. He drove a stake through her heart!" Moore's voice broke at that point.

"It *was* to have been a precedent-making decision," said Andrews, "as to whether he was to be indicted now for attempted homicide, or be detained until after the operation and face homicide charges if things do not go well. The matter of his detention then would have raised many more problems—which were fortunately resolved at his own suggestion. After his recovery he will retire to his bunker and remain there until the nature of the offense has been properly determined. He has volunteered to do this of his own free will, so no legal decision was delivered on the matter. His trial is postponed, therefore, until some of the surgical techniques have been refined—"

"What surgical techniques?" asked Moore, raising himself into a seated position and leaning against the headboard. His mind was fully alert for the first time since Christmas. He felt what was coming next.

"Those required by your wife's present condition."

He said one word.

"Explain."

Andrews shifted in his chair.

"Mister Unger," he began, "had a poet's conception as to the exact location of the human heart. He did not pierce it centrally, although the accidental angling of the stake did cause it to pass through the left ventricle.—That can be repaired easily enough, according to the medics.

"Unfortunately, however, the slanting of the shaft caused it to strike against her spinal column," he said, "smashing two vertebrae and cracking several others. It appears that the spinal cord was severed…"

Moore was numb again, numb with the realization that had dawned as the lawyer's words were filling the air between them. Of course she wasn't dead. Neither was she alive. She was sleeping the cold sleep. The spark of life would remain within her until the arousal began. *Then,* and only then, could she die. Unless—

"…Complicated by her pregnancy and the period of time necessary to raise her body temperature to an operable one," Andrews was saying.

"When are they going to operate?" Moore broke in.

"They can't say for certain, at this time," answered Andrews. "It will have to be a specially designed operation, as it raises problems for which there are answers in theory but not in practice. Any one of the factors could be treated at present, but the others couldn't be held in abeyance while the surgery is going on. Together, they are rather formidable—to repair the heart and fix the back, and to save the child, all at the same time, will require some new instrumentation and some new techniques."

"How long?" insisted Moore.

Andrews shrugged.

"They can't say. Months, years. She's all right as she is now, but—"

Moore asked him to go away, rather loudly, and he did.

The following day, feeling dizzy, he got to his feet and refused to return to bed until he could see Unger.

"He's in custody," said the medic who attended him.

"No, he isn't," replied Moore. "You're not a lawyer, and I've already spoken with one. He won't taken into legal custody until after he awakens from his next cold sleep—whenever that is."

It took over an hour for him to get permission to visit Unger. Then he was accompanied by Andrews and two orderlies.

"Don't you trust the symbolic penalty?" he smirked at Andrews. "You know that I'm supposed to think twice before I do it again."

Andrews looked away and did not answer him.

"Anyhow, I'm too weak and I don't have a hammer handy."

They knocked and entered.

Unger, his head turbanned in white, sat propped up by pillows. A closed book lay on the counterpane. He had been staring out of the window and into the garden. He turned his head toward them.

"Good morning, you son of a—" observed Moore.

"Please," Unger interrupted.

Moore did not know what to say next. He had already expressed all that he felt. So he headed for the chair beside the bed and sat on it. He fished his pipe from the pocket of his robe and fumbled with it to hide his discomfort. Then he realized he had no tobacco with him. Neither Andrews nor the orderlies appeared to be watching them.

He placed the dry pipe between his teeth and looked up.

"I'm sorry," said Unger. "Can you believe that?"

"No, I can't," answered Moore.

"She's the future and she's yours," said Unger. "I drove a stake through her heart but she isn't really dead. They say they're working on the operating machines now. The doctors will fix up everything that I did, as good as new." He winced and looked down at the bedclothes.

"If it's any consolation to you," he continued, "I'm suffering andI'll suffer more. There is no Senta to save this Dutchman. I'm going to ride it out with the Set, or without it, in a bunker—die in some foreign place among strangers." He looked up, regarding Moore with a weak smile. Moore stared him back down. "They'll save her!" he insisted. "She'll sleep until they're absolutely certain of the technique. Then you two will get off together and I'll keep on going. You'll never see me after that. I wish you happiness. I won't ask your forgiveness."

Moore got to his feet.

"We've got nothing left to say. We'll talk again some year, in a day or so."

He left the room wondering what else he could have said.

"An ethical question has been put before the Set—that is to say, myself," said Mary Maude. "Unfortunately, it was posed by government attorneys, so it cannot be treated as most ethical questions are to be treated. It requires an answer."

"Involving Moore and Unger?" asked Andrews.

"Not directly. Involving the entire Set, as a result of their escapade."

She indicated the fac-sheet on her desk. Andrews nodded.

" 'Unto Us a Babe is Born,' " she read, considering the photo of the prostrate Setman in the church. "A front-page editorial in this periodical has accused us of creating all varieties of neurotics—from necrophilists on down the line. Then there's that other photo—we still don't know who took it—here, on page three—"

"I've seen it."

"They now want assurances that ex-Setmen will remain frivolous and not turn into eminent undesirables."

"This is the first time it's ever happened—like this."

"Of course," she smiled, "they're usually decent enough to wait a few weeks before going anti-social—and wealth generally compensates for most normal maladjustments. But, according to the accusations, we are either selecting the wrong people—which is ridiculous—or not mustering them out properly when they leave—which is profoundly ridiculous. First, because I do all the interviewing, and second, because you *can't* boot a person half a century or so into the future and expect him to land on his feet as his normal, cheerful self, regardless of any orientation you may give him. Our people make a good show of it, though, because they don't generally do much of anything.

"But both Moore and Unger were reasonably normal, and they never knew each other particularly well. Both watched a little more closely than most Setmen as their worlds became history, and both were highly sensitive to those changes. Their problem, though, was interpersonal."

Andrews said nothing.

"By that, I mean it was a simple case of jealousy over a woman—an unpredictable human variable. I could not have foreseen their conflict. The changing times have nothing to do with it. Do they?"

Andrews did not answer.

"...Therefore, there is no problem," she continued. "We are not dumping Kaspar Hausers onto the street. We are simply transplanting wealthy people of good taste a few generations into the future—and they get on well. Our only misstep so far was predicated upon a male antagonism of the mutually accelerating variety, caused by a beautiful woman. That's all. Do you agree?"

"He thought that he was really going to die..." said Andrews. "I didn't stop to think that he knew nothing of the World Legal Code."

"A minor matter," she dismissed it. "He's still living."

"You should have seen his face when he came to in the Clinic."

"I'm not interested in faces. I've seen too many. Our problem now is to manufacture a problem and then to solve it to the government's satisfaction."

"The world changes so rapidly that I almost need to make a daily adjustment to it myself. These poor—"

"Some things do not change," said Mary Maude, "but I can see what you're driving at. Very clever. We'll hire us an independent Psych Team to do us a study indicating that what the Set needs is more adjustment, and they'll recommend that one day be set aside every year for therapeutic purposes. We'll hold each one in a different part of the world—at a non-Party locale. Lots of cities have been screaming for concessions. They'll all be days spent doing simple, adjustive things, mingling with un-Set people.

Then, in the evening we'll have a light meal, followed by casual, restful entertainment, and then some dancing—dancing's good for the psyche, it relaxes tensions.—I'm sure that will satisfy all parties concerned." She smiled at the last.

"I believe you are right," said Andrews.

"Of course. After the Psych Team writes several thousand pages, you'll draft a few hundred of your own to summarize the findings and cast them into the form of a resolution to be put before the board."

He nodded.

"I thank you for your suggestions."

"Any time. That's what I'm paid for."

After he had left, Mary Maude donned her black glove and placed another log on the fire. Genuine logs cost more and more every year, but she did not trust flameless heaters.

It was three days before Moore had recovered sufficiently to enter the sleep again. As the prep-injection dulled his senses and his eyes closed, he wondered what alien judgment day would confront him when he awakened. He knew, though, that whatever else the new year brought, his credit would be good.

He slept, and the world passed by.

PURPLE PRIESTESS OF THE MAD MOON

by Leigh Brackett (1915 - 1978)
Fantasy & Science Fiction, October

The title of the story hearkens back to the pulpiest days of science fiction. It's the sort of title that one would expect to find emblazoned in fiery letters across the cover of some 1942 issue of *Planet Stories* or *Thrilling Wonder Stories.* But in fact "Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon" was the lead story in the October 1964 issue of the sedate, dignified magazine *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* always the most literate of s-f magazines and not in the least pulpy in appearance or content. Its title was, actually, Leigh Brackett's own gentle homage to the pulp-magazine era of science fiction, when she had been the pre-eminent practitioner of swashbuckling adventure tales. There is very little about the story itself that is in any way pulpy—as was, indeed, also the case with most of the stories that Brackett had been selling to the pulps twenty years earlier, even if they bore titles like "Dragon-Queen of Jupiter" and "Thralls of the Endless Night."

Writing science fiction was mainly a hobby for her. Her primary professional activity lay in movies and television: she wrote the screenplays for such movies as *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), and George Lucas's *The Empire Strikes Back* (1979), for which she received a posthumous Hugo award. But she had a special love for pulp-magazine space opera, and in a long career that began with "Martian Quest" in *Astounding* in 1940 she became well known for vigorous, colorful tales that somehow combined the hard-driving clichés of action-magazine fiction with an elegance of style and a keen insight into character that were entirely untypical of their genre. She was herself vigorous and colorful,

> and she and her husband, the pioneering space-opera writer Edmond Hamilton, were familiar and well-liked figures at many science-fiction conventions. The 1964 World Science Fiction Convention, held in Oakland, California, acknowledged their great contribution to science fiction and the esteem in which they were held personally by designating them as joint guests of honor.

In the observation bubble of the TSS *Goddard* Harvey Selden watched the tawny face of the planet grow. He could make out rose-red deserts where tiny sandstorms blew, and dark areas of vegetation like textured silk. Once or twice he caught the bright flash of water from one of the canals. He sat motionless, rapt and delighted. He had been afraid that this confrontation would offer very little to his emotions; he had since childhood witnessed innumerable identical approaches on the tri-di screen, which was almost the same as being there one's self. But the actuality had a flavor and imminence that he found immensely thrilling.

After all, an alien planet…

After all, *Mars*…

He was almost angry when he realized that Bentham had come into the bubble. Bentham was Third Officer and at his age this was an admission of failure. The reason for it, Selden thought, was stamped quite clearly on his face, and he felt sorry for Bentham as he felt sorry for anyone afflicted with alcoholism. Still, the man was friendly and he had seemed much impressed by Selden's knowledge of Mars. So Selden smiled and nodded.

"Quite a thrill," he said.

Bentham glanced at the on-rushing planet. "It always is. You know anybody down there?"

"No. But after I check in with the Bureau…"

"When will you do that?"

"Tomorrow. I mean, counting from after we land, of course…a little confusing, isn't it, this time thing?" He knew they did three or four complete orbits on a descending spiral, which meant three or four days and nights.

Bentham said, "But in the meantime, you don't know anybody."

Selden shook his head.

"Well," said Bentham, "I'm having dinner with some Martian friends. Why don't you come along? You might find it interesting."

"Oh," said Selden eagerly, "that would be… But are you sure your friends won't mind? I mean, an unexpected guest dragged in at the last minute…"

"They won't mind," Bentham said. "I'll give them plenty of warning. Where are you staying?"

"The Kahora-Hilton."

"Of course," said Bentham. "I'll pick you up around seven." He smiled. "Kahora time."

He went out, leaving Selden with some lingering qualms of doubt. Bentham was perhaps not quite the person he would have chosen to introduce him to Martian society. Still, he was an officer and could be presumed to be a gentleman. And he had been on the Mars run for a long time. Of course he would have friends, and what an unlooked-for and wonderful chance this was to go actually into a Martian home and visit with a Martian family. He was ashamed of his momentary uneasiness, and was able to analyze it quite quickly as being based in his own sense of insecurity, which of course arose from being faced with a totally unfamiliar environment. Once he had brought this negative attitude into the open it was easy to correct it. After a quarter of an hour of positive therapy he found himself hardly able to wait for the evening.

Kahora had grown in half a century. Originally, Selden knew, it had been founded as a Trade City under the infamous old Umbrella Treaty, so-called because it could be manipulated to cover anything, which had been concluded between the then World Government of Terra and the impoverished Martian Federation of City-States. At that time the city was housed under a single dome, climate-conditioned for the comfort of the outworld traders and politicians who frequented it and who were unused to the rigors of cold and thin-aired Mars. In addition to the climate, various other luxuries were installed in the Trade Cities, so that they had been compared with certain Biblical locales, and crimes of many different sorts, even murder, had been known to occur in them.

But all of that, or nearly all of that, was in the bad old days of *laissez-faire,* and now Kahora was the administrative capital of Mars, sheltered under a complex of eight shining domes. From the spaceport fifteen miles away, Selden saw the city as a pale shimmer of gossamer bubbles touched by the low sun. As the spaceport skimmer flew him across the intervening miles of red sand and dark green moss-grass, he saw the lights come on in the quick dusk and the buildings underneath the domes rose and took shape, clean and graceful and clothed in radiance. He thought that he had never seen anything so beautiful. From the landing stage inside one of the domes a silent battery-powered cab took him to his hotel along gracious streets, where the lights glowed and people of many races walked leisurely. The whole trip, from debarkation to hotel lobby, was accomplished in completely air-conditioned comfort, and Selden was not sorry.

The landscape looked awfully bleak, and one needed only to glance at it to know that it was damnably cold. Just before the skimmer entered the airlock it crossed the Kahora canal, and the water looked like black ice. He knew that he might have to cope with all this presently, but he was not in any hurry.

Selden's room was pleasantly homelike and the view of the city was superb. He showered and shaved, dressed in his best dark silk, and then sat for a while on his small balcony overlooking the Triangle with the Three Worlds represented at its apices. The air he breathed was warm and faintly scented. The city sounds that rose to him were pleasantly subdued. He began to run over in his mind the rules he had learned for proper behavior in a Martian house, the ceremonial phrases and gestures. He wondered whether Bentham's friends would speak High or Low Martian. Low, probably, since that was most commonly in use with outsiders. He hoped his accent was not too barbarous. On the whole he felt adequate. He leaned back in his comfortable chair and found himself looking at the sky.

There were two moons in it, racing high above the glow and distortion of the dome. And for some reason, although he knew perfectly well that Mars had two moons, this bit of alienage had a powerful effect on him. For the first time he realized, not merely with his intellect but with his heart and bowels, that he was on a strange world a long, long way from home.

He went down to the bar to wait for Bentham.

The man arrived in good time, freshly turned out in civilian silks and, Selden was glad to see, perfectly sober. He bought him a drink and then followed him into a cab, which bore them quietly from the central dome into one of the outer ones.

"The original one," Bentham said. "It's chiefly residential now. The buildings are older, but very comfortable." They were halted at a concourse waiting for a flow of cross traffic to pass and Bentham pointed at the dome roof. "Have you seen the moons? They're both in the sky now. That's the thing people seem to notice the most when they first land."

"Yes," Selden said. "I've seen them. It is…uh…striking."

"The one we call Deimos…that one there...the Martian name is Vashna, of course…that's the one that in certain phases was called the Mad Moon."

"Oh no," Selden said. "That was Phobos. Denderon."

Bentham gave him a look and he reddened a bit. "I mean, I think it was." He knew damn well it was, but after all… "Of course you've been here many times, and I could be mistaken..."

Bentham shrugged. "Easy enough to settle it. We'll ask Mak."

"Who?"

"Firsa Mak. Our host."

"Oh," said Selden, "I wouldn't…"

But the cab sped on then and Bentham was pointing out some other thing of interest and the subject passed.

Almost against the outer curve of the dome there was a building of pale gold and the cab stopped there. A few minutes later Selden was being introduced to Firsa Mak.

He had met Martians before, but only rarely and never *in situ.* He saw a dark, small, lean, catlike man with the most astonishing yellow eyes. The man wore the traditional white tunic of the Trade Cities, exotic and very graceful. A gold earring that Selden recognized as a priceless antique hung from his left earlobe. He was not at all like the rather round and soft Martians Selden had met on Terra. He flinched before those eyes, and the carefully mustered words of greeting stuck in his throat. Then there was no need for them as Firsa Mak shook his hand and said, "Hello. Welcome to Mars. Come on in."

A wiry brown hand propelled him in the most friendly fashion into a large low room with a glass wall that looked out through the dome at the moon-washed desert. The furniture was simple modern stuff and very comfortable, with here and there a bit of sculpture or a wall-plaque as fine as, but no better than, the Martian hand-crafts obtainable at the good specialty shops in New York. On one of the couches a very long-legged, gaunt and white-haired Earthman sat drinking in a cloud of smoke. He was introduced as Altman. He had a face like old leather left too long in the sun, and he looked at Selden as from a great height and a far distance. Curled up beside him was a dark girl, or woman...Selden could not decide which because of the smoothness of her face and the too-great wisdom of her eyes, which were as yellow and unwinking as Firsa Mak's.

"My sister," Firsa Mak said. "Mrs. Altman. And this is Lella."

He did not say exactly who Lella was, and Selden did not at the moment care. She had just come in from the kitchen bearing a tray of something or other, and she wore a costume that Selden had read about but never seen. A length of brilliant silk, something between red and burnt orange, was wrapped about her hips and caught at the waist by a broad girdle. Below the skirt her slim brown ankles showed, with anklets of tiny golden bells that chimed faintly as she walked. Above the skirt her body was bare and splendidly made. A necklace of gold plaques intricately pierced and hammered circled her throat, and more of the tiny bells hung from her ears. Her hair was long and deeply black and her eyes were green, with the most enchanting tilt. She smiled at Selden, and moved away with her elfin music, and he stood stupidly staring after her, hardly aware that he had taken a glass of dark liquor from her proffered tray.

Presently Selden was sitting on some cushions between the Altmans and Firsa Mak, with Bentham opposite. Lella kept moving distractingly in and out, keeping their glasses filled with the peculiar smoky-tasting hellfire.

"Bentham tells me you're with the Bureau of Interworld Cultural Relations," Firsa Mak said.

"Yes," said Selden. Altman was looking at him with that strange remote glare, making him feel acutely uncomfortable.

"Ah. And what is your particular field?"

"Hand-crafts. Metalwork. Uh...the ancient type of thing, like that..." He indicated Lella's necklace, and she smiled.

"It is old," she said, and her voice was sweet as the chiming bells. "I would not even guess how old."

"The pierced pattern," Selden said, "is characteristic of the Seventeenth Dynasty of the Khalide Kings of Jekkara, which lasted for approximately two thousand years at the period when Jekkara was declining from her position as a maritime power. The sea was receding significantly then, say between fourteen and sixteen thousand years ago."

"So old?" Lella said, and fingered the necklace wonderingly.

"That depends," said Bentham. "Is it genuine, Lella, or is it a copy?"

Lella dropped to her knees beside Selden. "You will say."

They all waited. Selden began to sweat. He had studied hundreds of necklaces, but never *in situ*. Suddenly he was not sure at all whether the damned thing was genuine, and he was just as suddenly positive that they did know and were needling him. The plaques rose and fell gently to the lift of Lella's breathing. A faint dry spicy fragrance reached his nostrils. He touched the gold, lifted one of the plaques and felt of it, warm from her flesh, and yearned for a nice uncomplicated textbook that had diagrams and illustrations and nothing more to take your mind off your subject. He was tempted to tell them to go to hell. They were just waiting for him to make a mistake. Then he got madder and bolder and he put his whole hand under the collar, lifting it away from her neck and testing the weight of it. It was worn thin and light as tissue paper and the under surface was still pocked by the ancient hammer strokes in the particular fashion of the Khalide artificers.

It was a terribly crude test, but his blood was up. He looked into the tilted green eyes and said authoritatively, "It's genuine."

"How wonderful that you know!" She caught his hand between hers and pressed it and laughed aloud with pleasure. "You have studied very long?"

"Very long." He felt good now. He hadn't let them get him down. The hellfire had worked its way up into his head, where it was buzzing gently, and Lella's attention was even more pleasantly intoxicating.

"What will you do now with this knowledge?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "as you know, so many of the ancient skills have been lost, and your people are looking for ways to expand their economy, so the Bureau is hoping to start a program to re-educate metal-workers in places like Jekkara and Valkis..."

Altman said in a remote and very quiet voice, "Oh good God Allbloody-mighty."

Selden said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," Altman said. "Nothing."

Bentham turned to Firsa Mak. "By the way, Selden and I had a difference of opinion on the way here. He's probably right, but I said I'd ask you..."

Selden said hastily, "Oh, let's forget it, Bentham." But Bentham was obtuse and insistent.

"The Mad Moon, Firsa Mak. I say Vashna, he says Denderon."

"Denderon, of course," said Firsa Mak, and looked at Selden. "So you know all about that, too."

"Oh," said Selden, embarrassed and annoyed with Bentham for bringing it up, "please, we thoroughly understand that that was all a mistake."

Altman leaned forward. "Mistake?"

"Certainly. The early accounts..." He looked at Firsa Mak and his sister and Lella and they all seemed to be waiting for him to go on, so he did, uncomfortably. "I mean, they resulted from distortions of folklore, misinterpretation of local customs, pure ignorance...in some cases, they were downright lies." He waved his hand deprecatingly. "We don't believe in the Rites of the Purple Priestess and all that nonsense. That is to say, we don't believe they ever *occurred,* really."

He hoped that would close the subject, but Bentham was determined to hang to it. "I've read eye-witness accounts, Selden."

"Fabrications. Traveller's tales. After all, the Earthmen who first came to Mars were strictly the piratical exploiter type and were hardly either qualified or reliable observers..."

"They don't need us any more," said Altman softly, staring at Selden but not seeming to see him. "They don't need us at all." And he muttered something about winged pigs and the gods of the marketplace. Selden had a sudden horrid certainty that Altman was himself one of those early piratical exploiters and that he had irreparably insulted him. And then Firsa Mak said with honest curiosity,

"Why is it that all you young Earthmen are so ready to cry down the things your own people have done?"

Selden felt Altman's eyes upon him, but he was into this now and there was no backing down. He said with quiet dignity, "Because we feel that if our people have made mistakes we should be honest enough to admit them."

"A truly noble attitude," said Firsa Mak. "But about the Purple Priestess..."

"I assure you," said Selden hastily, "that old canard is long forgotten. The men who did the serious research, the anthropologists and sociologists who came after the...uh...the adventurers, were far better qualified to evaluate the data. They completely demolished the idea that the rites involved human sacrifice, and of course the monstrous Dark Lord the priestess was supposed to serve was merely the memory of an extremely ancient earth-god...mars-god, I should say, but you know what I mean, a primitive nature thing, like the sky or the wind."

Firsa Mak said gently, "But there was a rite..."

"Well, yes," said Selden, "undoubtedly. But the experts proved that it was purely vestigial, like...well, like our own children dancing around the Maypole."

"The Low-Canallers," said Altman, "never danced around any Maypoles." He rose slowly and Selden watched him stretch higher and higher above him. He must have stood a good six inches over six feet, and even from that height his eyes pierced Selden. "How many of your qualified observers went into the hills above Jekkara?"

Selden began to bristle a bit. The feeling that for some reason he was being baited grew stronger. "You must know that until very recently the Low-Canal towns were closed to Earthmen..."

"Except for a few adventurers."

"Who left highly dubious memoirs! And even yet you have to have a diplomatic passport involving miles of red tape, and you're allowed very little freedom of movement when you get there. But it *is* a beginning, and we hope, we hope very greatly, that we can persuade the Low-Canallers to accept our friendship and assistance. It's a pity that their own secretiveness fostered such a bad image. For decades the only ideas we had of the Low-Canal towns came from the lurid accounts of the early travelers, and-the extremely biased...as we learned later...attitude of the City-States. We used to think of Jekkara and Valkis as, well, perfect sinks of iniquity..."

Altman was smiling at him. "But my dear boy," he said. "They are. They are."

Selden tried to disengage his hand from Lella's. He found that he could not, and it was about then that he began to be just the least little bit frightened.

"I don't understand," he said plaintively. "Did you get me here just to bait me? If you did, I don't think it's very...Bentham?"

Bentham was at the door. The door now seemed to be much farther away than Selden remembered and there was a kind of mist between him and it so that Bentham's figure was indistinct. Nevertheless he saw it raise a hand and heard it say, "Good-bye." Then it was gone, and Selden, feeling infinitely forlorn, turned to look into Lella's eyes. "I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand." Her eyes were green and enormous and deep without limit. He felt himself topple and fall giddily into the abyss, and then of course it was far too late to be afraid.

Hearing returned to him first, with the steady roar of jets, and then there was the bodily sensation of being borne through air that was shaken occasionally by large turbulences. He opened his eyes, in wild alarm. It was several minutes before he could see anything but a thick fog. The fog cleared gradually and he found himself staring at Lella's gold necklace and remembering with great clarity the information concerning it that he had rattled off so glibly and with such modest pride. A simple and obvious truth came to him.

"You're from Jekkara," he said, and only then did he realize that there was a gag in his mouth. Lella started and looked down at him.

"He's awake."

Firsa Mak rose and bent over Selden, examining the gag and a set of antique manacles that bound his wrists. Again Selden flinched from those fierce and brilliant eyes. Firsa Mak seemed to hesitate, on the verge of removing the gag, and Selden mustered his voice and courage to demand explanations. A buzzer sounded in the cabin, apparently a signal from the pilot, and at the same time the motion of the copter altered. Firsa Mak shook his head.

"Later, Selden. I have to leave you this way because I can't trust you, and all our lives are in danger, not just yours…though yours most of all." He leaned forward. "This is necessary, Selden. Believe me."

"Not necessary," Altman said, appearing stooped under the cabin ceiling. "Vital. You'll understand that, later."

Lella said harshly, "I wonder if he will."

"If he doesn't," Altman said, "God help them all, because no one else can."

Mrs. Altman came with a load of heavy cloaks. They had all changed their clothes since Selden had last seen them, except Lella, who had merely added an upper garment of native wool. Mrs. Altman now wore the Low-Canal garb, and Firsa Mak had a crimson tunic held with a wide belt around his hips. Altman looked somehow incredibly right in the leather of a desert tribesman; he was too tall, Selden guessed, to pass for a Jekkaran.

He wore the desert harness easily, as though he had worn it many times. They made Selden stand while they wrapped a cloak around him, and he saw that he had been stripped of his own clothing and dressed in a tunic of ocher-yellow, and where his limbs showed they had been stained dark. Then they strapped him into his seat again and waited while the copter slowed and dropped toward a landing.

Selden sat rigid, numb with fear and shock, going over and over in his mind the steps by which he had come here and trying to make sense out of them. He could not. One thing was certain, Bentham had deliberately led him into a trap. But why? *Why?* Where were they taking him, what did they mean to do with him? He tried to do positive therapy but it was difficult to remember all the wisdom that had sounded so infinitely wise when he had heard it, and his eyes kept straying to the faces of Altman and Firsa Mak.

There was a quality about them both, something strange that he had never seen before. He tried to analyze what it was. Their flesh appeared to be harder and drier and tougher than normal, their muscles more fibrous and prominent, and there was something about the way they used and carried themselves that reminded him of the large carnivores he had seen in the zoo parks. There was, even more striking, an expression about the eyes and mouth, and Selden realized that these were violent men, men who could strike and tear and perhaps even kill. He was afraid of them. And at the same time he felt superior. He at least was above all that.

The sky had paled. Selden could see desert racing past below. They settled onto it with a great spuming of dust and sand. Altman and Firsa Mak between them half carried him out of the copter. Their strength was appalling. They moved away from the copter and the backwash of the rotors beat them as it took off. Selden was stricken by the thin air and bitter cold. His bones felt brittle and his lungs were full of knives. The others did not seem to mind. He pulled his cloak tight around him as well as he could with his bound hands, and felt his teeth chattering into the gag. Abruptly Lella reached out and pulled the hood completely down over his face. It had two eyeholes so that it could be used as a mask during sandstorms, but it stifled him and it smelled strangely. He had never felt so utterly miserable.

Dawn was turning the desert to a rusty red. A chain of time-eaten mountains, barren as the fossil vertebrae of some forgotten monster, curved across the northern horizon. Close at hand was a tumbled mass of rocky outcrops, carved to fantastic shapes by wind and sand. From among these rocks there came a caravan.

Selden heard the bells and the padding of broad splayed hoofs. The beasts were familiar to him from pictures. Seen in their actual scaly reality, moving across the red sand in that wild daybreak with their burdens and their hooded riders, they were apparitions from some older and uglier time. They came close and stopped, hissing and stamping and rolling their cold bright eyes at Selden, not liking the smell of him in spite of the Martian clothing he wore. They did not seem to mind Altman. Perhaps he had lived with the Martians so long that there was no difference now.

Firsa Mak spoke briefly with the leader of the caravan. The meeting had obviously been arranged, for led animals were brought. The women mounted easily. Selden's stomach turned over at the idea of actually riding one of these creatures. Still, at the moment, he was even more afraid of being left behind, so he made no protest when Firsa Mak and Altman heaved him up onto the saddle pad. One of them rode on each side of him, holding a lead rein. The caravan moved on again, northward toward the mountains.

Within an hour Selden was suffering acutely from cold, thirst, and the unaccustomed exercise. By noon, when they halted to rest, he was almost unconscious. Altman and Firsa Mak helped him down and then carried him around into some rocks where they took the gag out and gave him water. The sun was high now, piercing the thin atmosphere like a burning lance. It scalded Selden's cheeks but at least he was warm, or almost warm. He wanted to stay where he was and die. Altman was quite brutal about it.

"You wanted to go to Jekkara," he said. "Well, you're going…just a little bit earlier than you planned, that's all. What the hell, boy, did you think it was all like Kahora?"

And he heaved Selden onto his mount again and they went on.

In mid-afternoon the wind got up. It never really seemed to stop blowing, but in a tired sort of way, wandering across the sand, picking up a bit of dust and dropping it again, chafing the upthrust rocks a little deeper, stroking the ripple-patterns into a different design. Now it seemed impatient with everything it had done and determined to wipe it out and start fresh. It gathered itself and rushed screaming across the land, and it seemed to Selden that the whole desert took up and went flying in a red and strangling cloud. The sun went out. He lost sight of Altman and Firsa Mak at either end of his reins. He hung in abject terror to his saddle pad, watching for the small segment of rein he could see to go slack, when he would know that he was irretrievably lost. Then as abruptly as it had risen the wind dropped and the sand resumed its quiet, eternal rolling.

A little while after that, in the long red light from the west, they dipped down to a line of dark water strung glittering through the desolation, banded with strips of green along its sides. There was a smell of wetness and growing things, and an ancient bridge, and beyond the canal was a city, with the barren hills behind it.

Selden knew that he was looking at Jekkara. And he was struck with awe. Even at this late day few Earthmen had seen it. He stared through the eyeholes of his hood, seeing at first only the larger masses of rose-red rock, and then as the sun sank lower and the shadows shifted, making out the individual shapes of buildings that melted more and more gently into the parent rock the higher they were on the sloping cliffs. At one place he saw the ruins of a great walled castle that he knew had once housed those self-same Khalide Kings and lord knew how many dynasties before them in the days when this desert was the bottom of a blue sea, and there was a lighthouse still standing above the basin of a dry harbor half way up the cliffs. He shivered, feeling the enormous weight of a history in which he and his had had no part whatever, and it came to him that he had perhaps been just the tiniest bit presumptuous in his desire to teach these people.

That feeling lasted him half way across the bridge. By that time the western light had gone and the torches were flaring in the streets of Jekkara, shaken by the dry wind from the desert. His focus of interest shifted from the then to the now, and once more he shivered, but for a different reason. The upper town was dead. The lower town was not, and there was a quality to the sight and sound and smell of it that petrified him. Because it was exactly as the early adventurers in their dubious memoirs had described it.

The caravan reached the broad square that fronted the canal, the beasts picking their way protestingly over the sunken, tilted paving stones. People came to meet them. Without his noticing it, Altman and Firsa Mak had maneuvered Selden to the end of the line, and now he found himself being detached and quietly led away up a narrow street between low stone buildings with deep doorways and small window-places, all their corners worn round and smooth as stream-bed rocks by time and the rubbing of countless hands and shoulders. There was something going on in the town, he thought, because he could hear the voices of many people from somewhere beyond, as though they were gathering in a central place. The air smelled of cold and dust, and unfamiliar spices, and less identifiable things.

Altman and Firsa Mak lifted Selden down and held him until his legs regained some feeling. Firsa Mak kept glancing at the sky. Altman leaned close to Selden and whispered, “Do exactly as we tell you, or you won't last the night.”

“Nor will we,” muttered Firsa Mak, and he tested Selden's gag and made sure his cowl was pulled down to hide his face. “It's almost time.”

They led Selden quickly along another winding street. This one was busy and populous. There were sounds and sweet pungent odors and strange-colored lights, and there were glimpses into wickednesses of such fantastic array and imaginative genius that Selden's eyes bulged behind his cowl and he remembered his Seminars in Martian Culture with a species of hysteria. Then they came out into a broad square.

It was full of people, cloaked against the night wind and standing quietly, their dark faces still in the shaking light of the torches. They seemed to be watching the sky. Altman and Firsa Mak, with Selden held firmly between them, melted into the edges of the crowd. They waited. From time to time more people came from the surrounding streets, making no sound except for the soft slurring of sandalled feet and the faint elfin chiming of tiny bells beneath the cloaks of the women. Selden found himself watching the sky, though he did not understand why. The crowd seemed to grow more silent, to hold all breath and stirring, and then suddenly over the eastern roofs came the swift moon Denderon, low and red.

The crowd said, "Ah-h-h!" a long musical cry of pure despair that shook Selden's heart, and in the same moment harpers who had been concealed in the shadow of a time-worn portico struck their double-banked harps and the cry became a chant, half a lament and half a proud statement of undying hate. The crowd began to move, with the harpers leading and other men carrying torches to light the way. And Selden went with them, up into the hills behind Jekkara.

It was a long cold way under the fleeting light of Denderon. Selden felt the dust of millennia grate and crunch beneath his sandals and the ghosts of cities passed him to the right and left, ruined walls and empty marketplaces and the broken quays where the ships of the Sea-Kings docked. The wild fierce music of the harps sustained and finally dazed him. The long chanting line of people strung out, moving steadily, and there was something odd about the measured rhythm of their pace. It was like a march to the gallows.

The remnants of the works of man were left behind. The barren hills bulked against the stars, splashed with the feeble moonlight that now seemed to Selden to be inexpressibly evil. He wondered why he was no longer frightened. He thought perhaps he had reached the point of complete emotional exhaustion. At any rate he saw things clearly but with no personal involvement.

Even when he saw that the harpers and the torch-bearers were passing into the mouth of a cavern he was not afraid.

The cavern was broad enough for the people to continue marching ten abreast. The harps were muffled now and the chanting took on a deep and hollow tone. Selden felt that he was going downward. A strange and rather terrible eagerness began to stir in him, and this he could not explain at all. The marchers seemed to feel it too, for the pace quickened just a little to the underlying of the harp strings. And suddenly the rock walls vanished out of sight and they were in a vast cold space that was completely black beyond the pinprick glaring of the torches.

The chanting ceased. The people filed on both sides into a semicircle and stood still, with the harpers at the center and a little group of people in front of them, somehow alone and separate.

One of these people took off the concealing cloak and Selden saw that it was a woman dressed all in purple. For some obscure reason he was sure it was Lella, though the woman's face in the torchlight showed only the smooth gleaming of a silver mask, a very ancient thing with a subtle look of cruel compassion. She took in her hands a pale globed lamp and raised it, and the harpers struck their strings once. The other persons, six in number, laid aside their cloaks. They were three men and three women, all naked and smiling, and now the harps began a tune that was almost merry and the woman in purple swayed her body in time to it. The naked people began to dance, their eyes blank and joyous with some powerful drug, and she led them dancing into the darkness, and as she led them she sang, a long sweet fluting call.

The harps fell silent. Only the woman's voice sounded, and her lamp shone like a dim star, far away.

Beyond the lamp, an eye opened and looked and was aware.

Selden saw the people, the priestess and the six dancing ones, limned momentarily against that orb as seven people might be limned against a risen moon. Then something in him gave way and he fell, clutching oblivion to him like a saving armor.

They spent the remainder of that night and the following day in Firsa Mak's house by the dark canal, and there were sounds of terrible revelry in the streets. Selden sat staring straight ahead, his body shaken by small periodic tremors.

"It isn't true," he said, again and again. "It isn't true."

"It may not be true," Altman said, "but it's a fact. And it's the facts that kill you. Do you understand now why we brought you?"

"You want me to tell the Bureau about...about *that.*"

"The Bureau and anyone that will listen."

"But why me? Why not somebody really important, like one of the diplomats?"

"We tried that. Remember Loughlin Herbert?"

"But he died of a heart... Oh."

"When Bentham told us about you," Firsa Mak said, "you seemed young and strong enough to stand the shock. We've done all we can now, Selden. For years Altman and I have been trying..."

"They won't listen to us," Altman said. "They will not listen. And if they keep sending people in, nice well-meaning children and their meddling nannies, not knowing...I simply will not be responsible for the consequences." He looked down at Selden from his gaunt and weathered height.

Firsa Mak said softly, "This is a burden. We have borne it, Selden. We even take pride in bearing it." He nodded toward the unseen hills. *"That* has the power of destruction. Jekkara certainly, and Valkis probably, and Barrakesh, and all the people who depend on this canal for their existence. It can destroy. We know. This is a Martian affair and most of us do not wish to have outsiders brought into it. But Altman is my brother and I must have some care for his people, and I tell you that the Priestess prefers to choose her offerings from among strangers…"

Selden whispered, "How often?"

"Twice a year, when the Mad Moon rises. In between, it sleeps."

"It sleeps," said Altman. "But if it should be roused, and frightened, or made angry… For God's sake, Selden, tell them, so that at least they'll *know* what they're getting into."

Selden said wildly, "How can you live here, with that…"

Firsa Mak looked at him, surprised that he should ask. "Why," he said, "because we always have."

Selden stared, and thought, and did not sleep, and once he screamed when Lella came softly into the room.

On the second night they slipped out of Jekkara and went back across the desert to the place of rocks, where the copter was waiting. Only Altman returned with Selden. They sat silently in the cabin, and Selden thought, and from time to time he saw Altman watching him, and already in his eyes there was the understanding of defeat.

The glowing domes of Kahora swam out of the dusk, and Denderon was in the sky.

"You're not going to tell them," Altman said.

"I don't know," whispered Selden. "I don't know."

Altman left him at the landing stage. Selden did not see him again. He took a cab to his hotel and went directly to his room and locked himself in.

The familiar, normal surroundings aided a return to sanity. He was able to marshal his thoughts more calmly.

If he believed that what he had seen was real, he would have to tell about it, even if no one would listen to him. Even if his superiors, his teachers, his sponsors, the men he venerated and whose approval he yearned for, should be shocked, and look at him with scorn, and shake their heads, and forever close their doors to him. Even if he should be condemned to the outer darkness inhabited by people like Altman and Firsa Mak. Even if.

But if he did not believe that it was real, if he believed instead that it was illusion, hallucination induced by drugs and heaven knew what antique Martian chicanery… He had been drugged, that was certain. And Lella *had* practiced some sort of hypnotic technique upon him…

If he did *not* believe…

Oh God, how wonderful not to believe, to be free again, to be secure in the body of truth!

He thought, in the quiet and comforting confines of his room, and the longer he thought the more positive his thinking became, the more free of subjectivity, the deeper and calmer in understanding. By the morning he was wan and haggard but healed.

He went to the Bureau and told them that he had been taken ill immediately upon landing, which was why he had not reported. He also told them that he had had urgent word from home and would have to return there at once. They were very sorry to lose him, but most sympathetic, and they booked him onto the first available flight.

A few scars remained on Selden's psyche. He could not bear the sound of a harp nor the sight of a woman wearing purple. These phobias he could have put up with, but the nightmares were just too much. Back on Earth, he went at once to his analyst. He was quite honest with him, and the analyst was able to show him exactly what had happened. The whole affair had been a sex fantasy induced by drugs, with the Priestess a mother-image. The Eye which had looked at him then and which still peered unwinking out of his recurring dreams was symbolic of the female generative principle, and the feeling of horror it aroused in him was due to the guilt-complex he had because he was a latent homosexual. Selden was enormously comforted.

The analyst assured him that now that things were healthily out in the open, the secondary effects would fade away. And they might have done so except for the letter.

It arrived just six Martian months after his unfortunate dinner date with Bentham. It was not signed. It said, *"Lella waits for you at moonrise."* And it bore the sketch, very accurately and quite unmistakably done, of a single monstrous eye.

THE LAST LONELY MAN

by John Brunner (1934 - 1995)
New Worlds, May-June

John Brunner, a leading British science-fiction writer from his precocious beginnings in the 1950s to his sudden death at the science-fiction convention in Glasgow in 1995, reached the peak of his fame with the huge novel *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), a Hugo winner. He published dozens of other books and a great many short stories, among them this quiet masterpiece, which achieved great popularity and a number of anthology appearances.

"Don't see you in here much any more, Mr. Hale," Geraghty said as he set my glass in front of me.

"Must be eighteen months," I said. "But my wife's out of town and I thought I'd drop by for old times' sake." I looked down the long bar and round at the booths against the opposite wall, and added, "It looks as though you don't see anybody much any more. I never saw the place so empty at this time of evening. Will you have one?"

"Sparkling soda, if you please, Mr. Hale, and thank you very much." Geraghty got down a bottle and poured for himself. I never knew him drink anything stronger than a beer, and that rarely.

"Things have changed," he went on after a pause. "You know what caused it, of course."

I shook my head.

"Contact, naturally. Like it's changed everything else."

I stared at him for a moment, and then I had to chuckle. I said, "Well, I knew it had hit a lot of things—like the churches in particular. But I wouldn't have thought it would affect you."

"Oh, yes." He hoisted himself on a stool behind the bar; that was new since I used to come here regularly. Eighteen months ago he wouldn't have the chance to sit down all evening long; he'd be dead on his feet when the bar closed. "I figure it this way. Contact has made people more careful in some ways, and less in others. But it's cut out a lot of reasons for going to bars and for drinking. You know how it used to be. A bartender was a sort of professional open ear, the guy to spill your troubles to. That didn't last long after Contact came in. I knew a tender-hearted bartender who went on being like that for a while after Contact. He got himself loaded to *here* with lonely guys—and gals too." Geraghty laid his palm on the top of his head.

"Occupational risk!" I said.

"Not for long, though. It hit him one day what it would be like if they all came home to roost, so he went and had them all expunged and started over with people he chose himself, the way anyone else does. And round about then it all dried up. People don't come and spill their troubles any more. The need has mostly gone. And the other big reason for going to bars—chance company—that's faded out too. Now that people know they don't have to be scared of the biggest loneliness of all, it makes them calm and mainly self-reliant. Me, I'm looking round for another trade. Bars are closing down all over."

"You'd make a good Contact consultant," I suggested, not more than half-joking. He didn't take it as a joke, either.

"I've considered it," he said seriously. "I might just do that. I might just."

I looked around again. Now Geraghty had spelled it out for me, I could see how it must have happened. My own case, even if I hadn't realized it till now, was an illustration. I'd spilled troubles to bartenders in my time, gone to bars to escape loneliness. Contact had come in about three years ago, about two years ago it took fire and everyone but everyone lined up for the treatment, and a few months after that I quit coming here, where I'd formerly been as much of a fixture as the furniture. I'd thought nothing of it—put it down to being married and planning a family and spending money other ways.

But it wasn't for that. It was that the need had gone.

In the old style, there was a mirror mounted on the wall behind the bar, and in that mirror I could see some of the booths reflected. All were empty except one, and in that one was a couple. The man was nothing out of the ordinary, but the girl—no, woman—took my eye. She wasn't so young; she could be forty or so, but she had a certain something. A good figure helped, but most of it was in the face. She was thin, with a lively mouth and laughter wrinkles round the eyes, and she was clearly enjoying whatever she was talking about. It was pleasant to watch her enjoying it. I kept my eyes on her while Geraghty held forth.

"Like I say, it makes people more careful, and less careful. More careful about the way they treat others, because if they don't behave their own

Contacts are liable to expunge them, and then where will they be? Less careful about the way they treat themselves, because they aren't scared much of dying any more. They know that if it happens quick, without pain, it'll just be a blur and then confusion and then picking up again and then melting into someone else. No sharp break, no stopping. Have you picked anyone up, Mr. Hale?"

"Matter of fact, I have," I said. "I picked up my father just about a year ago."

"And was it okay?"

"Oh, smooth as oil. Disconcerting for a while—like having an itch I couldn't scratch—but that passed in about two to three months and then he just blended in and there it was."

I thought about it for a moment. In particular, I thought about the peculiar sensation of being able to remember how I looked in my cradle, from outside, and things like that. But it was comforting as well as peculiar, and anyway there was never any doubt about whose memory it was. All the memories that came over when a Contact was completed had indefinable auras that labelled them and helped keep the receiver's mind straight.

"And you?" I said.

Geraghty nodded. "Guy I knew in the Army. Just a few weeks back he had a car-smash. Poor guy lived for ten days with a busted back, going through hell. He was in bad shape when he came over. Pain—it was terrible!"

"Ought to write your Congressman," I said. "Get this new bill through. Hear about it?"

"Which one?"

"Legalize mercy-killing provided the guy has a valid Contact. Everyone has nowadays, so why not?"

Geraghty looked thoughtful. "Yes, I did hear about it. I wasn't happy about it. But since I picked up my buddy and got his memory of what happened—well, I guess I'm changing my mind. I'll do like you say."

We were quiet for a bit then, thinking about what Contact had done for the world. Geraghty had said he wasn't happy at first about this euthanasia bill—well, I and a lot of other people weren't sure about Contact at first, either. Then we saw what it could do, and had a chance to think the matter out, and now I felt I didn't understand how I'd gone through so much of my life without it. I just couldn't think myself back to a world where when you died you had to stop. It was horrible!

With Contact, that problem was solved. Dying became like a change of vehicle. You blurred, maybe blacked out, knowing you would come to, as it were, looking out of somebody's eyes that you had Contact with. You wouldn't be in control any more, but he or she would have your memories, and for two or three months you'd ease around, fitting yourself to your new partner, and then bit by bit there'd be a shift of viewpoint, and finally a melting together, and *click*. No interruption; just a smooth painless process taking you on into another installment of life as someone who was neither you nor someone else, but a product of the two.

For the receiver, as I knew from experience, it was at worst uncomfortable, but for someone you were fond of you could take far more than discomfort.

Thinking of what life had been like before Contact, I found myself shuddering. I ordered another drink—a double this time. I hadn't been out drinking for a long while.

I'd been telling Geraghty the news for maybe an hour, and I was on my third or fourth drink, when the door of the bar opened and a guy came in. He was medium-sized, rather ordinary, fairly well-dressed, and I wouldn't have looked at him twice except for the expression on his face. He looked so angry and miserable I couldn't believe my eyes.

He went up to this booth where the couple were sitting—the one where the woman was that I'd been watching—and planted his feet on the ground facing them. All the attractive light went out of the woman's face, and the man with her got half to his feet as if in alarm.

"You know," Geraghty said softly, "that looks like trouble. I haven't had a row in this bar for more than a year, but I remember what one looks like when it's brewing."

He got up off his stool watchfully, and moved down the bar so he could go through the gap in the counter if he had to.

I swivelled on my stool and caught some of the conversation. As far as I could hear, it was going like this.

"You expunged me, Mary!" the guy with the miserable face was saying. *"Did* you?"

"Now look here!" the other man cut in. "It's up to her whether she does or doesn't."

"You shut up," the newcomer said. "Well, Mary? *Did* you?"

"Yes, Mack, I did," she said. "Sam had nothing to do with it. It was entirely my idea—and your fault."

I couldn't see Mack's face, but his body sort of tightened up, shaking, and he put his arms out as though he was going to haul Mary out of her seat. Sam—I presumed Sam was the man in the booth—seized his arm, yelling at him.

That was where Geraghty came in, ordering them to quit where they were. They didn't like it, but they did, and Mary and Sam finished their drinks and went out of the bar, and Mack, after glaring after them, came up and took a stool next but one to mine.

"Rye," he said. "Gimme the bottle—I'll need it."

His voice was rasping and bitter, a tone I realized I hadn't heard in maybe months. I suppose I looked curious; anyway, he glanced at me and saw I was looking at him, and spoke to me.

"Know what that was all about?"

I shrugged. "Lost your girl?" I suggested.

"Much worse than that—and she isn't so much a lost girl as a heartless she-devil." He tossed down the first of the rye that Geraghty had brought for him. I noticed that Geraghty had moved to the other end of the counter and was washing glasses. If he was out of the habit of listening to people's troubles, I wouldn't blame him, I thought.

"She didn't look that way," I said at random.

"No, she doesn't." He took another drink and then sat for a while with the empty glass between his hands, staring at it.

"I suppose you have Contacts?" he said at last. It was a pretty odd question, and I answered it automatically out of sheer surprise.

"Well—yes, of course I have!"

"I haven't," he said. "Not now. Not any more. *Damn* that woman!"

I felt the nape of my neck prickle. If he was telling the truth—well, he was a kind of living ghost! Everyone I knew had at least one Contact; I had three. My wife and I had a mutual, of course, like all married couples, and as insurance against our being killed together in a car wreck or by some similar accident I had an extra one with my kid brother Joe and a third with a guy I'd known in college. At least, I was fairly sure I did; I hadn't heard from him in some months and he might perhaps have expunged me. I made a mental note to look him up and keep the friendship moving.

I studied this lonely guy. His name was Mack—I'd heard him called that. He was probably ten years older than I was, which made him in his middle forties—plenty old enough to have dozens of potential Contacts. There was nothing visibly wrong with him except this look of unspeakable misery he wore—and if he really had no Contacts at all, then I was surprised the look was of mere misery, not of terror.

"Did—uh—did Mary know that she was your only Contact?" I said.

"Oh, she knew. Of course. That's why she did it without telling me." Mack refilled his glass and held the bottle towards me. I was going to refuse, but if someone didn't keep the poor devil company he'd probably empty the bottle himself, and then maybe walk out staggering drunk and fall under a car and be done for. I really felt sorry for him. Anyone would have.

"How did you find out?"

"She—well, she went out tonight and I called at her place and someone said she'd gone out with Sam, and Sam generally brings her here. And there she was, and when I put it to her she confessed. I guess it was as well the bartender stepped in, or I'd have lost control and maybe done something really serious to her."

I said, "Well—how come she's the only one? Have you no friends or anything?"

That opened the floodgates.

The poor guy—his full name was Mack Wilson—was an orphan brought up in a foundling home which he hated; he ran away in his teens and was committed to reform school for some petty theft or other, and hated that too, and by the time he got old enough to earn his living he was sour on the world, but he'd done his best to set himself straight, only to find that he'd missed learning how. Somewhere along the line he'd failed to get the knack of making friends.

When he'd told me the whole story, I felt he was truly pitiable. When I contrasted his loneliness with my comfortable condition I felt almost ashamed. Maybe the rye had a lot to do with it, but it didn't feel that way. I wanted to cry, and I hardly even felt foolish for wanting.

Round about ten or ten-thirty, when most of the bottle had gone, he slapped the counter and started to get down from his stool. He wobbled frighteningly. I caught hold of him, but he brushed me aside.

"Home, I guess," he said hopelessly. "If I can make it. If I don't get run down by some lucky so-and-so who's careless what he hits because he's all right, he has Contacts aplenty."

He was darned right—that was the trouble. I said, "Look, don't you think you should sober up first?"

"How in hell do you think I'll get to sleep if I'm not pickled?" he retorted. And he was probably right there, too. He went on, "You wouldn't know, I guess: what it's like to lie in bed, staring into the dark, without a Contact anywhere. It makes the whole world seem hateful and dark and hostile…"

"Jesus!" I said, because that really hit me.

A sudden glimmer of hope came into his eyes. He said, "I don't suppose—no, it's not fair. You're a total stranger. Forget it."

I pressed him, because it was good to see any trace of hope on *that* face. After a bit of hesitation, he came out with it.

"You wouldn't make a Contact with me, would you? Just to tide me over till I talk one of my friends round? I know guys at work I could maybe persuade. Just a few days, that's all."

"At this time of night?" I said. I wasn't sure I liked the idea; still, I'd have him on my conscience if I didn't fall in.

"They have all-night Contact service at La Guardia Airport," he said. "For people who want to make an extra one as insurance before going on a long flight. We could go there."

"It'll have to be a one-way, not a mutual," I said. "I don't have twenty-five bucks to spare."

"You'll do it?" He looked as though he couldn't believe his ears. Then he grabbed my hand and pumped it up and down, and settled his check and hustled me to the door and found a cab and we were on the way to the airport before I really knew what was happening.

The consultant at the airport tried to talk me into having a mutual; Mack had offered to pay for it. But I stood firm on that. I don't believe in people adding Contacts to their list when the others are real friends. If something were to happen to me, I felt, and somebody other than my wife, or my brother, or my long-time friend from college, were to pick me up, I was certain they'd all three be very much hurt by it. So since there were quite a few customers waiting to make an extra Contact before flying to Europe, the consultant didn't try too hard.

It had always been a source of wonder to me that Contact was such a simple process. Three minutes' fiddling with the equipment; a minute or two to put the helmets properly on our heads; mere seconds for the scan to go to completion during which the brain buzzed with fragments of memory dredged up from nowhere and presented like a single movie frames to consciousness...and finished.

The consultant gave us the standard certificates and the warranty form—valid five years, recommended reinforcement, owing to personality development, temporal-geographical factor, in the event of death instantaneous transfer, adjustment lapse, in the event of more than one Contact being extant some possibility of choice, and so on. And there it was.

I never had been able to make sense of the principle on which Contact worked. I knew it wasn't possible before the advent of printed-molecule electronics, which pushed the information capacity of computers up to the level of the human brain and beyond. I knew vaguely that in the first place they had been trying to achieve mechanical telepathy, and that they succeeded in finding means to scan the entire content of a brain and transfer it to an electronic store. I knew also that telepathy didn't come, but immortality did.

What it amounted to, in lay terms, was this: only the advent of death was enough of a shock to the personality to make it want to get up and go. Then it wanted but *desperately*. If at some recent time the personality had been as it were shown to someone else's mind, there was a place ready for it to go to.

At that point I lost touch with the explanations. So did practically everybody. Resonance came into it, and maybe the receiver's mind vibrated in sympathy with the mind of the person about to die; that was a fair picture, and the process worked, so what more could anyone ask?

I was later in coming out from under than he was; this was a one-way, and he was being scanned which is quick, while I was being printed which is slightly slower. When I came out he was trying to get something straight with the consultant, who wasn't interested, but he wouldn't be just pushed aside—he had to have his answer. He got it as I was emerging from under the helmet.

"No, there's no known effect. Sober or drunk, the process goes through!"

The point had never occurred to me before—whether liquor would foul up the accuracy of the Contact.

Thinking of the liquor reminded me that I'd drunk a great deal of rye and it was the first time I'd had more than a couple of beers in many months. For a little while I had a warm glow, partly from the alcohol, partly from the knowledge that thanks to me this last lonely man wasn't lonely any more.

Then I began to lose touch. I think it was because Mack had brought the last of the bottle along and insisted on our toasting our new friendship—or words like that. Anyway, I remember that he got the cab and told the hackie my address and then it was the next morning and he was sleeping on the couch in the rumpus room and the doorbell was going like an electric alarm.

I pieced these facts together a little afterwards. When I opened the door, it was Mary standing there. The woman who had expunged Mack the day before.

She came in quite politely, but with a determined expression which I couldn't resist in my morning-after state, and told me to sit down and took a chair herself.

She said, "Was it true what Mack told me on the phone?"

I looked vacant. I *felt* vacant.

Impatiently, she said, "About him making a Contact with you. He called me up at two a.m. and told me the whole story. I wanted to throw the phone out the window, but I hung on and got your name out of him, and some of your address, and the rest from the phone book. Because I wouldn't want anybody to have Mack wished on him. Not anybody."

By this time I was starting to connect. But I didn't have much to say. I let her get on with it.

"I once read a story," she said. "I don't remember who by. Perhaps you've read it too. About a man who saved another man from drowning. And the guy was grateful, gave him presents, tried to do him favors, said he was his only friend in all the world, dogged his footsteps, moved into his home—and finally the guy who'd saved him couldn't stand it any longer and took him and pushed him back in the river. That's Mack Wilson. That's why Mack Wilson has been expunged by everybody he's conned into making Contact with him in the past two mortal years. I stood it for going on three months, and that's about the record, as I understand it."

There was a click, a door opening, and there was Mack in shirt and pants, roused from his sleep in the rumpus room by the sound of Mary's voice. She got in first. She said, "You see? He's started already."

"You!" Mack said. "Haven't you done enough?" And he turned to me. "She isn't satisfied with expunging me and leaving me without a Contact in the world. She has to come here and try to talk you into doing the same! Can you imagine anybody hating me like that?"

On the last word his voice broke, and I saw that there were real tears in his eyes.

I put my muddled mind together and found something to say.

"Look," I said. "All I did this for was just that I don't think anyone should have to go without a Contact nowadays. All I did it for was to tide Mack over." I was mainly talking to Mary. "I drank too much last night and he brought me home and that was why he's here this morning. I don't care who he is or what he's done—I have Contacts myself, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't, and until Mack fixes up something maybe with somebody where he works I'll go bail for him. That's all."

"That's the way it started with me," Mary said. "Then he moved into my apartment. Then he started following me on the street to make sure nothing happened to me. He said."

"Where would I have been if something had?" Mack protested.

Just then I caught sight of the clock on the wall, and saw it was noon. I jumped up.

"Jesus!" I said. "My wife and kids get back at four, and I promised to clear the apartment up while they were away."

"I'll give you a hand," Mack said. "I owe you that, at least."

Mary got to her feet. She was looking at me with a hopeless expression. "Don't say you weren't warned," she said.

So she was right. So Mack was very helpful. He was better around the house than a lot of women I've known, and though it took right up until my wife got home with the children the job was perfect. Even my wife was impressed. So since it was getting on towards the evening she insisted on Mack staying for supper with us, and he went and got some beer and over it he told my wife the spot that he'd been put in, and then at around nine or half past he said he wanted an early night because of work tomorrow, and went home.

Which seemed great under the circumstances. I dismissed what Mary had said as the bitterness of a disappointed woman, and felt sorry for her.

She hadn't looked the type to be so bitter when I first saw her the evening before.

It was about three or four days later that I began to catch on. There was this new craze for going to see pre-Contact movies, and though I didn't feel that I would get a bang out of watching soldiers and gunmen kill each other without Contact to look forward to, my wife had been told by all her friends that she oughtn't to miss out on this eerie thrill.

Only there was the problem of the kids. We couldn't take eleven-month twins along, very well. And we'd lost our regular sitter and when we checked up there just didn't seem to be anyone on hand.

I tried to talk her into going alone, but she didn't like the idea. I'd noticed that she'd given up watching pre-Contact programs on TV, so that was of a piece.

So we'd decided to scrap the idea, though I knew she was disappointed, until Mack called, heard the problem, and at once offered to sit in.

Great, we thought. He seemed willing, competent, and even eager to do us the favor, and we had no worries about going out. The kids were fast asleep before we left.

We parked the car and started to walk around to the movie house. It was getting dark, and it was chilly, so we hurried along although we had plenty of time before the start of the second feature.

Suddenly my wife glanced back and stopped dead in her tracks. A man and a boy following close behind bumped into her, and I had to apologize and when they'd gone on asked what on earth was the trouble.

"I thought I saw Mack following us," she said. "Funny…"

"Very funny," I agreed. "Where?" I looked along the sidewalk, but there were a lot of people, including several who were dressed and built similarly to Mack. I pointed this out, and she agreed that she'd probably been mistaken. I couldn't get her to go beyond *probably.*

The rest of our walk to the movie was a kind of sidelong hobble, because she kept staring behind her. It got embarrassing after a while, and suddenly I thought I understood why she was doing it.

I said, "You're not really looking forward to this, are you?"

"What do you mean?" she said, injured. "I've been looking forward to it all week."

"You can't really be," I argued. "Your subconscious is playing tricks on you—making you think you see Mack, so that you'll have an excuse to go back home instead of seeing the movies. If you're only here because of your *kaffeeklatsch* friends who've talked you into the idea, and you don't actually think you'll enjoy it, let's go."

I saw from her expression I was at least half right. But she shook her head. "Don't be silly," she said. "Mack would think it was awfully funny, wouldn't he, if we came right home? He might think we didn't trust him, or something."

So we went in, and we sat through the second feature and were duly reminded of what life was like—and worse, what death was like—in those distant days a few years ago when Contact didn't exist. When the lights went up briefly between the two pictures I turned to my wife.

"I must say—" I began and broke off short, staring.

He *was* there, right across the aisle from us. I knew it was Mack, not just someone who looked like Mack, because of the way he was trying to duck down into his collar and prevent me from recognizing him. I pointed, and my wife's face went absolutely chalk-white.

We started to get to our feet. He saw us, and ran.

I caught him halfway down the block, grabbing his arm and spinning him round, and I said, "What in hell is this all about? This is just about the dirtiest trick that anyone ever played on me!"

If anything happened to those kids, of course, that was the end. You couldn't make a Contact for a child till past the age of reading, at the earliest.

And he had the gall to try and argue with me. To make excuses for himself. He said something like, "I'm sorry, but I got so worried I couldn't stand it any longer. I made sure everything was all right, and I only meant to be out for a little while, and—"

My wife had caught up by now, and she turned it on. I never suspected before that she knew so many dirty words, but she did, and she used them, and she finished up by slapping him across the face with her purse before leading me into a dash for the car. All the way home she was telling me what an idiot I'd been to get tangled up with Mack, and I was saying what was perfectly true—that I did the guy a favor because I didn't think anyone should have to be lonely and without a Contact any more—but true or not it sounded hollow.

The most terrifying sound I ever heard was the noise of those two kids squalling as we came in. But nothing was wrong with either of them except they were lonely and miserable, and we comforted them and made a fuss of them till they quieted down.

The outside door opened while we were breathing sighs of relief and there he was again. Of course, we'd left him a key to the door while we were out, in case he had to step round the corner or anything. Well, a few minutes is one thing—but tracking us to the movie house and then sitting through the show was another altogether.

I was practically speechless when I saw who it was. I let him get the first few words in because of that. He said, "Please, you must understand! All I wanted was to make sure nothing happened to you! Suppose you'd had a crash on the way to the movie, and I didn't know—where would I be then? I sat here and worried about it till I just couldn't stand any more, and all I meant to do was make sure you were safe, but when I got down to the movie house I got worried about your coming home safe and—"

I still hadn't found any words because I was so blind angry. So, since I couldn't take any more, I wound up and let him have it on the chin. He went halfway backwards through the open door behind him, catching at the jamb to stop himself falling, and his face screwed up like a mommy's darling who's got in a game too rough for him and he started to snivel.

"Don't drive me away!" he moaned. "You're the only friend I have in the world! Don't drive me away!"

"Friend!" I said. "After what you did this evening I wouldn't call you my friend if you were the last guy on Earth! I did you a favor and you've paid it back exactly the way Mary said you would. Get the hell *out* of here and don't try to come back, and first thing in the morning I'm going to stop by at a Contact agency and have you expunged!"

"No!" he shrieked. I never thought a man could scream like that—as though red-hot irons had been put against his face. "No! You can't do that! It's inhuman! It's—"

I grabbed hold of him and twisted the key out of his fingers, and for all he tried to cling to me and went on blubbering I pushed him out of the door and slammed it in his face.

That night I couldn't sleep. I lay tossing and turning, staring up into the darkness. After half an hour of this, I heard my wife sit up in the other bed.

"What's the trouble, honey?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess maybe I feel ashamed of myself for kicking Mack out the way I did."

"Nonsense!" she said sharply. "You're too soft-hearted. You couldn't have done anything else. Lonely or not lonely, he played a disgusting, wicked trick on us—leaving the twins alone like that after he'd promised! You didn't promise him anything. You said you were doing him a favor. You couldn't know what sort of a person he'd turn out to be. Now you relax and go to sleep. I'm going to wake you early and make sure of getting you to a Contact agency before you go in to work."

At that precise moment, as though he'd been listening, I picked him up.

I could never describe—not if I tried for twenty lifetimes—the slimy, underhand, snivelly triumph that was in his mind when it happened. I couldn't convey the sensation of "Yah, tricked you again!" Or the undertone of "You treated me badly, see how badly I can treat you."

I think I screamed a few times when I realized what had happened. Of course. He'd conned me into making a Contact with him, just as he'd done to a lot of other people before—only they'd seen through him in good time and expunged without telling him, so that when he found out, it was too late to cheat on the deal the way he'd cheated me.

I'd told him I was going to expunge him in the morning—that's a unilateral decision, as they call it, and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop me. Something in my voice must have shown that I really meant it. Because, though he couldn't stop me, he could forestall me, and he'd done exactly that.

He'd shot himself in the heart.

I went on hoping for a little while. I fought the nastiness that had come into my mind—sent my wife and kids off to her parents again over the weekend—and tried to sweat it out by myself. I didn't make it. I was preoccupied for a while finding out exactly how many lies Mack had told me—about his reform school, his time in jail, his undiscovered thefts and shabby tricks played on people he called friends like the one he'd played on me—but then it snapped, and I had to go and call up my father-in-law and find out if my wife had arrived yet, and she hadn't, and I chewed my nails to the knuckle and called up my old friend Hank who said hullo, yes of course I still have your Contact you old so-and-so and how are you and say I may be flying up to New York next weekend—

I was *horrified*. I couldn't help it. I guess he thought I was crazy or at any rate idiotically rude, when I tried to talk him out of flying up, and we had a first-rate argument which practically finished with him saying he'd expunge the Contact if that was the way I was going to talk to an old pal.

Then I panicked and had to call my kid brother Joe, and he wasn't home—gone somewhere for the weekend, *my* part of my mind told me, and nothing to worry about. But Mack's part of my mind said he was probably dead and my old friend was going to desert me and pretty soon I wouldn't have a Contact at all and then I'd be permanently dead and how about that movie last night with people being killed and having no Contacts at all?

So I called my father-in-law again and yes my wife and the twins were there now and they were going on the lake in a boat belonging to a friend and I was appalled and tried to say that it was too dangerous and don't let them and I'd come up myself and hold them back if I had to and—

It hasn't stopped. It's been quite a time blending Mack in with the rest of me; I hoped and hoped that when the *click* came things would be better. But they're worse.

Worse?

Well—I can't be sure about that. I mean, it's true that until now I was taking the most appalling risks. Like going out to work all day and leaving my wife at home alone—why, anything might have happened to her! And not seeing Hank for months on end. And not checking with Joe every chance I got, so that if he was killed I could have time to fix up another Contact to take his place.

It's safer now, though. Now I have this gun, and I don't go out to work, and I don't let my wife out of my sight at all, and we're going to drive very carefully down to Joe's place, and stop him doing foolish things too, and when I've got him lined up we'll go to Hank's and prevent him from making that insanely risky flight to New York and then maybe things will be okay.

The thing that worries me, though, is that I'll have to go to sleep some time, and—what if something happens to them all when I'm asleep?

SOLDIER, ASK NOT

by Gordon R. Dickson (1923 - 2001)
Galaxy, October

Gordon Dickson already had fifteen years of solidly professional science fiction behind him when the novella "Soldier, Ask Not" brought him the Hugo award for the best short science fiction story of 1964 at the 1965 World Science Fiction Convention in London, first of the many such awards he had won.

"Soldier, Ask Not" belongs to what Dickson called the "Childe Cycle"—more commonly referred to as the "Dorsai" series, after its first and perhaps best-known title, the 1959 novel *Dorsai!* The complex saga, which runs to many volumes, depicts a universe in which humanity has been bred into several distinct genetic strains, of which the warrior caste, the Dorsai, receives the closest attention. The stories have maintained wide popularity over the forty-year span of Dickson's work on them, and must be regarded as central to his huge oeuvre.

Soldier, ask not—now or ever—
Where to war your banners go…

I

As I got off the spaceliner on St. Marie, the little breeze from the higher pressure of the ship's atmosphere at my back was like a hand from the darkness behind me, shoving me into the dark day and the rain. My Newsman's cloak covered me. The wet chill of the day wrapped around me but did not enter me. I was like the naked claymore of my own early ancestors, wrapped and hidden in the plaid—sharpened on a stone—and carried now at last to the meeting for which it had been guarded over three years of waiting.

A meeting in the cold rain of spring. I felt it, cold as old blood on my hands and tasteless on my lips. Above, the sky was low and clouds flowing to the east. The rain fell steadily.

The sound of it was like a rolling of drums as I went down the outside landing stairs, the multitude of raindrops sounding their own end against the unyielding concrete all around. The concrete stretched far from the ship in every direction, hiding the earth, as bare and clean as the last page of an account book before the final entry. At its far edge, the spaceport terminal stood like a single gravestone. The curtains of falling water between it and me thinned and thickened like the smoke of battle, but could not hide it entirely from my sight.

It was the same rain that falls in all places and on all worlds. It had fallen like this on Athens of Old Earth, when I was only a boy, on the dark, unhappy house of the uncle who brought me up after my parents' death, on the ruins of the Parthenon as I saw it from my bedroom window.

I listened to it now as I went down the landing stairs, drumming on the great ship behind me which had shifted me free between the stars—from Old Earth to this second smallest of the worlds, this small terraformed planet under the Procyon suns—and drumming hollowly upon the Credentials case sliding down the conveyor belt beside me. That case now meant nothing to me—neither my papers nor the Credentials of Impartiality I had carried six years and worked so long to earn. Now I thought less of these than of the name of the man I should find dispatching groundcars at the edge of the field. If, that was, he was actually the man my Earth informants had named to me. And if they had not lied…

"…Your luggage, sir?"

I woke from my thoughts and the rain. I had reached the concrete. The debarking officer smiled at me. He was older than I, though he looked younger. As he smiled some beads of moisture broke and spilled like tears from the brown visor-edge of his cap onto the tally sheet he held.

"Send it to the Friendly compound," I said. "I'll take the Credentials case."

I took it up from the conveyor belt and turned to walk off. The man standing in a dispatcher's uniform by the first groundcar in line did fit the description.

"Name, sir?" he said. "Business on St. Marie?"

If he had been described to me, I must have been described to him. But I was prepared to humor him.

"Tam Olyn," I said. "Old Earth resident and Interworld News Network representative. I'm here to cover the Friendly-Exotic conflict." I opened my case and gave him my papers.

"Fine, Mr. Olyn." He handed them back to me, damp from the rain. He turned away to open the door of the car beside him and set the automatic pilot. "Follow the highway straight to Joseph's Town. Put it on automatic at the city limits and the car'll take you to the Friendly compound."

"All right," I said. "Just a minute."

He turned back. He had a young, good-looking face with a little mustache and he looked at me with a bright blankness. "Sir?"

"Help me get in the car."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir." He came quickly over to me. "I didn't realize your leg—"

"Damp stiffens it," I said. He adjusted the seat and I got my left leg in behind the steering column. He started to turn away.

"Wait a minute," I said again. I was out of patience. "You're Walter Imera, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," he said softly.

"Look at me," I said. "You've got some information for me, haven't you?"

He turned slowly back to face me. His face was still blank.

"No, sir."

I waited a long moment, looking at him.

"All right," I said then, reaching for the car door. "I guess you know I'll get the information anyway. And they'll believe you told me."

His little mustache began to look like it was painted on.

"Wait—" he said.

"What for?"

"Look," he said, "you've got to understand. Information like that's not part of your news, is it? I've got a family—"

"And I haven't," I said. I felt nothing for him.

"But you don't understand. They'd kill me. That's the sort of organization the Blue Front is now, here on St. Marie. What d'you want to know about them for? I didn't understand you meant—"

"All right," I said. I reached for the car door.

"Wait—" He held out a hand to me in the rain. "How do I know you can make them leave me alone if I tell you?"

"They may be back in power here some day," I said. "Not even outlawed political groups want to antagonize the Interworld News Network." I started to close the door once more.

"All right—" he said quickly. "All right. You go to New San Marcos. The Wallace Street Jewelers there. It's just beyond Joseph's Town, where the Friendly compound is you're going to." He licked his lips. "You'll tell them about me?"

"I'll tell them." I looked at him. Above the edge of the blue uniform collar on the right side of his neck I could see an inch or two of fine silver chain, bright against winter-pale skin. The crucifix attached to it would be down under his shirt. "The Friendly soldiers have been here years now. How do people like them?"

He grinned a little. His color was coming back.

"Oh, like anybody," he said. "You just have to understand them. They've got their own ways."

I felt the ache in my stiff leg where the doctors on New Earth had taken the needle from the spring rifle out of it three years before.

"Yes, they have," I said. "Shut the door."

He shut it. I drove off.

There was a St. Christopher's medal on the car's instrument panel. One of the Friendly soldiers would have ripped it off and thrown it away, or refused the car. And so it gave me a particular pleasure to leave it where it was, though it meant no more to me than it would to him. It was not just because of Dave, my brother-in-law, and the other prisoners they had shot down on New Earth. It was simply because there are some duties that have a small element of pleasure. After the illusions of childhood are gone and there is nothing left but duties, such pleasures are welcome. Fanatics, when all is said and done, are no worse than mad dogs.

But mad dogs have to be destroyed; it is a simple common sense.

And you return to common sense after a while in life, inevitably. When the wild dreams of justice and progress are all dead and buried, when the painful beatings of feeling inside you are finally stilled, then it becomes best to be still, unliving, and unyielding as—the blade of a sword sharpened on a stone. The rain through which such a blade is carried to its using does not stain it, any more than the blood in which it is bathed at last. Rain and blood are alike to sharpened iron.

I drove for half an hour past wooded hills and plowed meadows. The furrows of the fields were black in the rain. I thought it a kinder black than some other shades I had seen; and at last I reached the outskirts of Joseph's Town.

The autopilot of the car threaded me through a small, neat, typical St. Marie City of about a hundred thousand people. We came out on the far side into a cleared area, beyond which lifted the massive, sloping concrete walls of a military compound.

A Friendly non-com stopped my car at the gate with his black spring rifle, and opened the car door at my left.

"Thee have business here?"

His voice was harsh and high in his nose. The cloth tabs of a Groupman edged his collar. Above them his forty-year-old face was lean and graven with lines. Both face and hands, the only uncovered parts of him, looked unnaturally white against the black cloth and rifle.

I opened the case beside me and handed him my papers.

"My Credentials," I said. "I'm here to see your acting Commander of Expeditionary Forces, Commandant Jamethon Black."

"Move over, then," he said nasally. "I must drive thee."

I moved.

He got in and took the stick. We drove through the gate and turned down an approach alley. I could see an interior square at the alley's far end. The close concrete walls on either side of us echoed the sound of our passage as we went. I heard drill commands growing louder as we approached the square. When we rolled out into it, soldiers were drawn up in ranks for their mid-day service, in the rain.

The Groupman left me and went in the entrance of what seemed to be an office inset in the wall on one side of the square. I looked over the soldiers standing in formation. They stood at present-arms, their position of worship under field conditions; and as I watched, the officer standing facing them, with his back to a wall, led them into the words of their Battle Hymn.

Soldier, ask not—now or ever,
Where to war your banners go.
Anarch's legions all surround us.
Strike! And do not count the blow!

I sat trying not to listen. There was no musical accompaniment, no religious furniture or symbols except the thin shape of the cross whitewashed on the gray wall behind the officer. The massed male voices rose and fell slowly in the dark, sad hymn that promised them only pain, and suffering, and sorrow. At last, the final line mourned its harsh prayer for a battle death, and they ordered arms.

A Groupman dismissed the ranks as the officer walked back past my car without looking at me, and passed in through the entrance where my non-commissioned guide had disappeared. As he passed I saw the officer was young.

A moment later the guide came for me. Limping a little on my stiffened leg, I followed him to an inner room with the lights on above a single desk. The young officer rose and nodded as the door closed behind me. He wore the faded tabs of a commandant on his uniform lapels.

As I handed my Credentials across the desk to him, the glare of the light over the desk came full in my eyes, blinding me. I stepped back and blinked at his blurred face. As it came back into focus I saw it for a moment as if it was older, harsher, twisted and engraved with the lines of years of fanaticism.

Then my eyes refocused completely, and I saw him as he actually was. Dark-faced, but thin with the thinness of youth rather than that of self-starvation. He was not the face burned in my memory. His features were regular to the point of being handsome, his eyes tired and shadowed; and I saw the straight, weary line of his mouth above the still, self-controlled stiffness of his body, smaller and slighter than mine.

He held the Credentials without looking at them. His mouth quirked a little, dryly and wearily, at the corners. "And no doubt, Mr. Olyn," he said, "you've got another pocket filled with authorities from the Exotic Worlds to interview the mercenary soldiers and officers they've hired from the Dorsai and a dozen other worlds to oppose God's Chosen in War?"

I smiled. Because it was good to find him as strong as that, to add to my pleasure of breaking him.

II

I looked across the ten feet or so of distance that separated us. The Friendly non-com who had killed the prisoners on New Earth had also spoken of God's Chosen.

"If you'll look under the papers directed to you," I said, "you'll find them. The News Network and its people are impartial. We don't take sides."

"Right," said the dark young face opposing me, "takes sides."

"Yes, Commandant," I said. "That's right. Only sometimes it's a matter of debate where Right is. You and your troops here now are invaders on the world of a planetary system your ancestors never colonized. And opposing you are mercenary troops hired by two worlds that not only belong under the Procyon suns but have a commitment to defend the smaller worlds of their system—of which St. Marie is one. I'm not sure Right *is* on your side."

He shook his head slightly and said, "We expect small understanding from those not Chosen." He transferred his gaze from me to the papers in his hand.

"Mind if I sit down?" I said. "I've got a bad leg."

"By all means." He nodded to a chair beside his desk and, as I sat down, seated himself. I looked across the papers on the desk before him and saw, standing to one side, the solidograph of one of the windowless high-peaked churches the Friendlies build. It was a legitimate token for him to own—but there just happened to be three people, an older man and woman and a young girl of about fourteen, in the foreground of the image. All three of them bore a family resemblance to Jamethon Black. Glancing up from my credentials he saw me looking at them; and his gaze shifted momentarily to the graph and away again, as if he would protect it.

"I'm required, I see," he said, drawing my eyes back to him, "to provide you with cooperation and facilities. We'll find quarters for you here. Do you need a car and driver?"

"Thanks," I said. "That commercial car outside will do. And I'll manage my own driving."

"As you like." He detached the papers directed to him, passed the rest back to me and leaned toward a grill in his desktop. "Groupman."

"Sir," the grill answered promptly.

"Quarters for a single male civilian. Parking assignment for a civilian vehicle, personnel."

"Sir."

The voice from the grill clicked off. Jamethon Black looked across his desk at me. I got the idea he was waiting for my departure.

"Commandant," I said, putting my credentials back in their case, "two years ago your Elders of the United Churches on Harmony and Association found the planetary government of St. Marie in default of certain disputed balances of credit, so they sent an expedition in here to occupy and enforce payment. Of that expedition, how much in the way of men and equipment do you have left?"

"That, Mr. Olyn," he said, "is restricted military information."

"However—" and I closed the case—"you, with the regular rank of commandant, are acting Commander of Forces for that remnant of your expedition. That position calls for someone about five ranks higher than you. Do you expect such an officer to arrive and take charge?"

"I'm afraid you'd have to ask that question of Headquarters on Harmony, Mr. Olyn."

"Do you expect reinforcements of personnel and more supplies?"

"If I did—" his voice was level—"I would have to consider that restricted information, too."

"You know that it's been pretty widely mentioned that your General Staff on Harmony has decided that this expedition to St. Marie is a lost cause? But that to avoid loss of face they prefer you here to be cut up, instead of withdrawing you and your men."

"I see," he said.

"You wouldn't care to comment?"

His dark, young, expressionless face did not change. "Not in the case of rumors, Mr. Olyn."

"One last question then. Do you plan to retreat westward, or surrender when the spring offensive of the Exotic mercenary forces begins to move against you?"

"The Chosen in War never retreat," he said. "Neither do they abandon, or suffer abandonment by, their Brothers in the Lord." He stood up. "I have work I must get back to, Mr. Olyn."

I stood up, too. I was taller than he was, older, and heavier-boned. It was only his almost unnatural composure that enabled him to maintain his appearance of being my equal or better.

"I'll talk to you later, perhaps, when you've got more time." I said.

"Certainly." I heard the office door open behind me. "Groupman," he said, speaking past me, "take care of Mr. Olyn."

The Groupman he had turned me over to found me a small concrete cubicle with a single high window, a camp bed and a uniform cabinet. He left me for a moment and returned with a signed pass.

"Thanks," I said as I took it. "Where do I find the Headquarters of the Exotic Forces?"

"Our latest advices, sir," he said, "is that they're ninety kilometers east of here. New San Marcos." He was my height, but, like most of them, half a dozen years younger than I, with an innocence that contrasted with the strange air of control they all had.

"San Marcos." I looked at him. "I suppose you enlisted men know your General Headquarters on Harmony has decided against wasting replacements for you?"

"No, sir," he said. I might have commented on the rain for all the reaction he showed. Even these boys were still strong and unbroken. "Is there somewhat else?"

"No," I said. "Thanks."

He went out. And I went out, to get in my car and head ninety kilometers east through the same sort of country to New San Marcos. I reached it in about three-quarters of an hour. But I did not go directly to find the Exotic Field Headquarters. I had other fish to fry.

These took me to the Wallace Street Jewelers. There, three shallow steps down from street level and an opaqued door let me in to a long, dim-lighted room filled with glass cases. There was a small elderly man at the back of the store behind the final case and I saw him eyeing my correspondent's cloak and badge as I got closer.

"Sir?" he said, as I stopped across the case from him. He raised gray, narrow old eyes in a strangely smooth face to look at me.

"I think you know what I represent," I said. "All worlds know the News Services. We're not concerned with local politics."

"Sir?"

"You'll find out how I learned your address anyway." I kept on smiling at him. "So I'll tell you it was from a spaceport autodispatcher named Imera. I promised him protection for telling me. We'd appreciate it if he remains well and whole."

"I'm afraid—" He put his hands on the glass top of the case. They were veined with the years. "You wanted to buy something?"

"I'm willing to pay in good will," I said, "for information."

His hands slid off the counter-top.

"Sir." He sighed a little. "I'm afraid you're in the wrong store."

"I'm sure I am," I said. "But your store'll have to do. We'll pretend it's the right store and I'm talking to someone who's a member of the Blue Front."

He shook his head slowly and stepped back from the case.

"The Blue Front is illegal," he said. "Good-by, sir."

"In a moment. I've got a few things to say first."

"Then I'm sorry." He retreated toward some drapes covering a doorway. "I can't listen. No one will come into this room with you, sir, as long as you talk like that."

He slipped through the drapes and was gone. I looked around the long, empty room.

"Well," I said, a little more loudly, "I guess I'll have to speak to the walls. I'm sure the walls can hear me."

I paused. There was no sound. "All right," I said. "I'm a correspondent. All I'm interested in is information. Our assessment of the military situation here on St. Marie—" and here I told the truth—"shows the Friendly Expeditionary Forces abandoned by their home headquarters and certain to be overrun by the Exotic Forces as soon as the ground dries enough for heavy equipment to move."

There was still no answer, but the back of my neck knew they were listening, and watching me.

"As a result," I went on—and here I lied, though they would have no way of knowing—"we consider it inevitable that the Friendly Command here will have got in contact with the Blue Front. Assassination of enemy commanders is expressly in violation of the Mercenaries' Code and the Articles of Civilized Warfare—but civilians could do what soldiers could not."

Still there was no sound or movement beyond the drapes.

"A news representative," I said, "carries Credentials of Impartiality. You know how highly these are held. I only want to ask a few questions. And the answers will be kept confidential..."

For a last time I waited, and there was still no answer. I turned and went up the long room and out. It was not until I was well out on to the street that I let the feeling of triumph within spread out and warm me.

They would take the bait. People of their sort always did. I found my car and drove to Exotic Headquarters.

These were outside the town. There a mercenary commandant named Janol Marat took me in charge. He conducted me to the bubble structure of their HQ building. There was a feel of purpose, there, a sure and cheerful air of activity. They were well armed, well trained. After the Friendlies it jumped at me. I said so to Janol.

"We've got a Dorsai Commander and we outnumber the opposition." He grinned at me. He had a deeply tanned, long face that went into deep creases as his lips curved up. "That makes everybody pretty optimistic. Besides, our commander gets promoted if he wins. Back to the Exotics and staff rank—out of field combat for good. It's good business for us to win."

I laughed and he laughed.

"Tell me more, though," I said. "I want reasons I can use in the stories I send back to News Network."

"Well—" he answered the snappy salute of a passing groupman, a Cassidan, by the look of him—"I guess you might mention the usual—the fact our Exotic employers don't permit themselves to use violence and consequently they're always rather more generous than otherwise when it comes to paying for men and equipment. And the OutBond—that's the Exotic Ambassador to St. Marie, you know—"

"I know."

"He replaced the former OutBond here three years ago. Anyway, he's something special, even for someone from Mara or Kultis. He's an expert in ontogenic calculations. If that means much to you. It's all over my head." Janol pointed. "Here's the Field Commander's office. He's Kensie Graeme."

"Graeme?" I said, frowning. I had spent a day at the Hague looking up Kensie Graeme before I came, but I wanted Janol's reactions to him. "Sounds familiar." We approached the office building. "Graeme..."

"You're probably thinking of another member of the same family." Janol took the bait. "Donal Graeme. A nephew. The one who pulled that wild stunt not long ago, attacking Newton with just a handful of Freiland ships. Kensie is Donal's uncle. Not as spectacular as the young Graeme, but I'll bet you'll like him better than you would the nephew. Kensie's got two men's likeableness." He looked at me, grinning slightly again.

"That supposed to mean something special?" I said.

"That's right," said Janol. "His own likeableness and his twin brother's, too. Meet Ian Graeme sometime when you're in Blauvain. That's where the Exotic embassy is, east of here. Ian's a dark man."

We walked into the office.

"I can't get used," I said, "to how so many Dorsai seem related."

"Neither can I. Actually, I guess it's because there really aren't so many of them. The Dorsai's a small world, and those that live more than a few years—" Janol stopped by a commandant sitting at a desk. "Can we see the Old Man, Hari? This is a News Network man."

"Why, I guess so." The other looked at his desk signal board. "The OutBond's with him, but he's just leaving now. Go on in."

Janol led me between the desks. A door at the back of the room opened before we reached it and a calm-faced man of middle age wearing a blue robe and close-cropped white hair came out. He looked strange but not ridiculous—particularly after you met his odd, hazel-colored eyes.

He was an Exotic.

I knew of Padma, as I knew the Exotics. I had seen them on their own home worlds of Mara and Kultis. A people committed to non-violence, mystics but very practical mystics, masters of what were known as the "strange sciences"—a dozen wizardic step-children of early psychology, sociology and the humanistic fields of research.

"Sir," said Janol to Padma, "this is—"

"Tam Olyn. I know," said Padma softly. He smiled up at me, and those eyes of his seemed to catch light for a moment and blind me. "I was sorry to learn about your brother-in-law, Tam."

I went quite cool all over. I had been ready to walk on, but now I stood stock still and looked at him.

"My brother-in-law?" I said.

"The young man who died near Castlemain, on New Earth."

"Oh, yes," I said, between stiff lips. "I'm surprised that you'd know."

"I know because of you, Tam." Once more the hazel eyes of Padma seemed to catch light. "We have a science called ontogenics, by which we calculate the probabilities of human actions in present and future situations. You've been an important factor in those calculations for some time." He smiled. "That's why I was expecting to meet you here, and now. We've calculated you into our present situation here on St. Marie, Tam."

"Have you?" I said. "Have you? That's interesting."

"I thought it would be," said Padma softly. "To you, especially. Someone like a newsman, like yourself, would find it interesting."

"It is," I said. "It sounds like you know more than I do about what I'm going to be doing here."

"We've got calculations," said Padma in his soft voice, "to that effect. Come see me in Blauvain, Tam, and I'll show you."

"I'll do that," I said.

"You'll be very welcome." Padma inclined his head. His blue robe whispered on the floor as he turned, and went out of the room.

"This way," said Janol, touching my elbow. I started as if I had just wakened from a deep sleep. "The commander's in here."

I followed him automatically into a further office. The individual I had come to see stood up as we came through the door. He was a great, lean man in field uniform, with a heavy-boned, but open, smiling face under black, slightly curly hair. A sort of golden warmth of personality—a strange thing in a Dorsai—seemed to flow out from him as he rose to meet me and his long-fingered, powerful hand swallowed mine in a handshake.

"Come on in," he said. "Let me fix you up with a drink. Janol," he added to my mercenary commandant from New Earth, "no need for you to stick around. Go on to chow. And tell the rest of them in the outer office to knock off."

Janol saluted and went. I sat down as Graeme turned to a small bar cabinet behind his desk. And for the first time in three years, under the magic of the unusual fighting man opposite me, a little peace came into my soul. With someone like this on my side, I could not lose.

III

"Credentials?" asked Graeme, as soon as we were settled with drinks of Dorsai whisky—which is a fine whisky—in our hands.

I passed my papers over. He glanced through them, picking out the letters from Sayona, the Bond of Kultis, to *"Commander—St. Marie Field Forces."* He looked these over and put them aside. He handed me back the credentials folder.

"You stopped at Joseph's Town first?" he said.

I nodded. I saw him looking at my face, and his own sobered.

"You don't like the Friendlies," he said.

His words took my breath away. I had come prepared to fence for an opening to tell him. It was too sudden. I looked away.

I did not dare answer right away. I could not. There was either too much or too little to say if I let it come out without thinking. Then I got a grip on myself.

"If I do anything at all with the rest of my life," I said, slowly, "it'll be to do everything in my power to remove the Friendlies and all they stand for from the community of civilized human beings."

I looked back up at him. He was sitting with one massive elbow on his desktop, watching me.

"That's a pretty harsh point of view, isn't it?"

"No harsher than theirs."

"Do you think so?" he said seriously. "I wouldn't say so."

"I thought," I said, "you were the one who was fighting them."

"Why, yes." He smiled a little. "But we're soldiers on both sides."

"I don't think they think that way."

He shook his head a little.

"What makes you say that?" he said.

"I've seen them," I answered. "I got caught up front in the lines on Castlemain on New Earth, three years ago." I tapped my stiff knee. "I got shot and I couldn't navigate. The Cassidans around me began to retreat—they were mercenaries, and the troops opposing them were Friendlies hired out as mercenaries."

I stopped and took a drink of the whisky. When I took the glass away, Graeme had not moved. He sat as if waiting.

"There was a young Cassidan, a buck soldier," I said. "I was doing a series on the campaign from an individual point of view. I'd picked him for my individual. It was a natural choice. You see—" I drank again, and emptied the glass—"my younger sister went out on contract as an accountant to Cassida two years before that, and she'd married him. He was my brother-in-law."

Graeme took the glass from my hand and silently replenished it.

"He wasn't actually a military man," I said. "He was studying shift mechanics and he had about three years to go. But he stood low on one of the competitive examinations at a time when Cassida owed a contractual balance of troops to New Earth." I took a deep breath. "Well, to make a long story short, he ended up on New Earth in this same campaign I was covering. Because of the series I was writing, he was assigned to me. We both thought it was a good deal for him, that he'd be safer that way."

I drank some more of the whisky.

"But," I said, "you know, there's always a better story a little deeper in the combat zone. We got caught up front one day when the New Earth troops were retreating. I picked up a needle through the kneecap. The Friendly armor was moving up and things were getting hot. The soldiers around us took off toward the rear in a hurry, but Dave tried to carry me, because he thought the Friendly armor would fry me before they had time to notice I was a non-combatant. Well," I took another deep breath, "the Friendly ground troops caught us. They took us to a sort of clearing where they had a lot of prisoners and kept us there for a while. Then a Groupman—one of their fanatic types, a tall, starved-looking soldier about my age—came up with orders they were to re-form for a fresh attack."

I stopped and took another drink. But I could not taste it.

"That meant they couldn't spare men to guard the prisoners. They'd have to turn them loose back of the Friendly lines. The Groupman said that wouldn't work. They'd have to make sure the prisoners couldn't endanger them."

Graeme was still watching me.

"I didn't understand. I didn't even catch on when the other Friendlies—none of them were non-coms like the Groupman—objected." I put my glass on the desk beside me and stared at the wall of the office, seeing it all over again, as plainly as if I looked through a window at it. "I remember how the Groupman pulled himself up straight. I saw his eyes. As if he'd been insulted by the others, objecting.

" '*Are they Chosen of God?*' he shouted at them. '*Are they of the Chosen?*' "

I looked across at Kensie Graeme and saw him still motionless, still watching me, his own glass small in one big hand.

"You understand?" I said to him. "As if because the prisoners weren't Friendlies, they weren't quite human. As if they were some lower order it was all right to kill." I shook, suddenly. "And he did it! I sat there against a tree, safe because of my News Correspondent's uniform and watched him shoot them down. All of them. I sat there and looked at Dave, and he looked at me, sitting there, as the Groupman shot him!"

I quit all at once. I hadn't meant to have it all come out like that. It was just that I'd been able to tell no one who would understand how helpless I had been. But something about Graeme had given me the idea he would understand.

"Yes," he said after a moment, and took and filled my glass again. "That sort of thing's very bad. Was the Groupman found and tried under the Mercenaries Code?"

"After it was too late, yes."

He nodded and looked past me at the wall. "They aren't all like that, of course."

"There's enough to give them a reputation for it."

"Unfortunately, yes. Well"—he smiled slightly at me—"we'll try and keep that sort of thing out of this campaign."

"Tell me something," I said, putting my glass down. "Does that sort of thing—as you put it—ever happen to the Friendlies, themselves?"

Something took place then in the atmosphere of the room. There was a little pause before he answered. I felt my heart beat slowly, three times, as I waited for him to speak.

He said at last, "No, it doesn't."

"Why not?" I said.

The feeling in the room became stronger. And I realized I had gone too fast. I had been sitting talking to him as a man and forgetting what else he was. Now I began to forget that he was a man and become conscious of him as a Dorsai—an individual as human as I was, but trained all his life, and bred down the generations to a difference. He did not move or change the tone of his voice, or any such thing; but somehow he seemed to move off some distance from me, up into a higher, colder, stonier land into which I could venture only at my peril.

I remembered what was said about his people from that small, cold stony-mountained world: that if the Dorsai chose to withdraw their fighting men from the services of all the other worlds, and challenge those other worlds, not the combined might of the rest of civilization could stand against them. I had never really believed that before. I had never even really thought much about it. But sitting there just then, because of what was happening in the room, suddenly it became real to me. I could feel the knowledge, cold as a wind blowing on me off a glacier, that it was true; and then he answered my question.

"Because," said Kensie Graeme, "anything like that is specifically prohibited by Article Two of the Mercenaries' Code."

Then he broke out abruptly into a smile and what I had just felt in the room withdrew. I breathed again.

"Well," he said, putting his glass down empty on the desk, "how about joining us in the Officers' Mess for something to eat?"

I had dinner with them and the meal was very pleasant. They wanted to put me up for the night—but I could feel myself being pulled back to that cold, joyless compound near Joseph's Town, where all that waited for me was a sort of cold and bitter satisfaction at being among my enemies.

I went back.

It was about eleven p.m. when I drove through the gate of the compound and parked, just as a figure came out of the entrance to Jamethon's headquarters. The square was dim-lighted with only a few spotlights about the walls, their light lost in the rain-wet pavement. For a moment I did not recognize the figure—and then I saw it was Jamethon.

He would have passed by me at some little distance, but I got out of my car and went to meet him. He stopped when I stepped in front of him.

"Mr. Olyn," he said evenly. In the darkness I could not make out the expression of his face.

"I've got a question to ask," I said, smiling in the darkness.

"It's late for questions."

"This won't take long." I strained to catch the look on his face, but it was all in shadow. "I've been visiting the Exotic camp. Their commander's a Dorsai. I suppose you know that?"

"Yes." I could barely see the movement of his lips.

"We got to talking. A question came up and I thought I'd ask you, Commandant. Do you ever order your men to kill prisoners?"

An odd, short silence came between us. Then he answered.

"The killing or abuse of prisoners of war," he said without emotion, "is forbidden by Article Two of the Mercenaries' Code."

"But you aren't Mercenaries here, are you? You're native troops in service to your own True Church and Elders."

"Mr. Olyn," he said, while I still strained without success to make out the expression of his shadowed face—and it seemed that the words came slowly, though the tone of the voice that spoke them remained as calm as ever, "My Lord has set me to be His servant and a leader among men of war. In neither of those tasks will I fail Him."

And with that he turned, his face still shadowed and hidden from me, and passed around me and went on.

Alone, I went back inside to my quarters, undressed and lay down on the hard and narrow bed they had given me. The rain outside had stopped at last. Through my open, unglazed window I could see a few stars showing.

I lay there getting ready to sleep and making mental notes on what I would need to do tomorrow. The meeting with Padma the OutBond had jolted me sharply. I took his so-called calculations of human actions with reservation—but I had been shaken to learn of them. I would have to find out more about how much his science of ontogenics knew and could predict. If necessary, from Padma himself. But I would start first with ordinary reference sources.

No one, I thought, would ordinarily entertain the fantastic thought that one man like myself could destroy a culture involving the populations of two worlds. No one, except perhaps a Padma. What I knew, he with his calculations might have discovered. And that was that the Friendly worlds of Harmony and Association were facing a decision that would mean life or death to their way of living. A very small thing could tip the scales they weighed on.

For there was a new wind blowing between the stars.

Four hundred years before we had all been men of Earth—Old Earth, the mother planet which was my native soil. One people.

Then, with the movement out to new worlds, the human race had "splintered," to use an Exotic term. Every small social fragment and psychological type had drawn apart by itself, and joined others like it and progressed toward specialized types. Until we had half a dozen fragments of human types—the warrior on the Dorsai, the philosopher on the Exotic worlds, the hard scientist on Newton, Cassida and Venus, and so forth…

Isolation had bred specific types. Then a growing intercommunication between the younger worlds, now established, and an ever-increasing rate of technological advance had forced specialization. The trade between the worlds was the trade of skilled minds. Generals from the Dorsai were worth their exchange rate in psychiatrists from the Exotics. Communications men like myself from Old Earth bought spaceship designers from Cassida. And so it had been for the last hundred years.

But now the worlds were drifting together. Economics was fusing the race into one whole, again. And the struggle on each world was to gain the advantages of that fusion while holding on to as much as possible of their own ways.

Compromise was necessary—and the harsh, stiff-necked Friendly religion forbade compromise and had made many enemies. Already public opinion moved against the Friendlies on other worlds. Discredit them, smear them, publicly here in this campaign and they would not be able to hire out their soldiers. They would lose the balance of trade they needed to hire the skilled specialists trained by the special facilities of other worlds, and which they needed to keep their own two poor-in-natural-resources worlds alive. They would die.

As young Dave had died. Slowly. In the dark.

...In the darkness now, as I thought of it, it rose up before me once again. It had been only noon when we were taken prisoner, but by the time the Groupman came with his orders for our guards to move up, the sun was almost down.

After they left, after it was all over and I was left alone, I crawled to the bodies in the clearing. And I found Dave among them; and he was not quite gone.

He was wounded in the body and I could not stop the bleeding.

It would not have helped if I had, they told me afterwards. But then it seemed that it would have. So I tried. But finally I gave up and by that time it was quite dark. I only held him and did not know he was dead until he began to grow cold. And then was when I had begun to change into what my uncle had always tried to make me. I felt myself die inside. Dave and my sister were to have been my family, the only family I had ever had hopes of keeping. Instead, I could only sit there in the darkness, holding him and hearing the blood from his red-soaked clothing, falling drop by drop, slowly on the dead variform oak leaves beneath us.

I lay there now in the Friendly compound, not able to sleep and remembering. And after a while I heard the soldiers marching, forming in the square for midnight service.

I lay on my back, listening to them. Their marching feet stopped at last. The single window of my room was over my bed—high in the wall against which the left side of my cot was set. It was unglazed and the night air with its sounds came freely through it along with the dim light from the square which painted a pale rectangle on the opposite wall of my room. I lay watching that rectangle and listening to the service outside; and I heard the duty officer lead them in a prayer for worthiness. After that they sang their battle hymn again, and I lay hearing it, this time, all the way through.

Soldier, ask not—now, or ever,
Where to war your banners go.
Anarch's legions all surround us.
Strike—and do not count the blow.

Glory, honor—praise and profit,
Are but toys of tinsel worth.
Render up your work, unasking,
Leave the human clay to earth.

Blood and sorrow—pain unending,
Are the portion of us all.
Grasp the naked sword, opposing.
Gladly in the battle fall.

So shall we, anointed soldiers,
Stand at last before the Throne.
Baptized in our wounds, red-flowing,
Sealed unto our Lord—alone!

After that they dispersed to cots no different from mine.

I lay there listening to the silence in the square and the measured dripping of a rain-spout outside by my window, its slow drops falling after the rain, one by one, uncounted in the darkness.

IV

After the day I landed, there was no more rain. Day by day the fields dried. Soon they would be firm underneath the weight of heavy surface-war equipment, and everyone knew that then the Exotic spring offensive would get under way. Meanwhile both Exotic and Friendly troops were in training.

During the next few weeks, I was busy about my newswork. Mostly feature and small stories on the soldiers and the native people. I had dispatches to send and I sent them faithfully. A correspondent is only as good as his contacts; I made contacts everywhere but among the Friendly troops. These remained aloof, though I talked to many of them. They refused to show fear or doubt.

I had heard these Friendly soldiers were generally under-trained because the suicidal tactics of their officers kept their ranks always filled with green replacements. But the ones here were the remnants of an Expeditionary Force six times their present numbers. They were all veterans, though most of them were in their teens. Only here and there, among the non-coms, and more often among the commissioned officers, I saw the prototype of the non-com who had ordered the prisoners shot on New Earth. Here, the men of this type looked like rabid, gray wolves mixed among polite, well-schooled young dogs just out of puppyhood.

It was a temptation to think that they alone were what I had set out to destroy.

To fight that temptation I told myself that Alexander the Great had led expeditions against the hill tribes and ruled in Pella, capital of Macedonia, and ordered men put to death when he was sixteen. But still the Friendly soldiers looked young to me. I could not help contrasting them with the adult, experienced mercenaries in Kensie Graeme's forces. For the Exotics, in obedience to their principles, would hire no drafted troops or soldiers who were not in uniform of their own free will.

Meanwhile I had heard no word from the Blue Front. But by the time two weeks had gone, I had my own connections in New San Marcos, and at the beginning of the third week one of these brought me word that the jeweler's shop in Wallace Street there had closed its door—had pulled its blinds and emptied the long room of stock and fixtures, and moved or gone out of business. That was all I needed to know.

For the next few days, I stayed in the vicinity of Jamethon Black himself, and by the end of the week my watching him paid off.

At ten o'clock that Friday night I was up on a catwalk just above my quarters and under the sentry-walk of the walls, watching as three civilians with Blue Front written all over them drove into the square, got out and went into Jamethon's office.

They stayed a little over an hour. When they left, I went back down to bed. That night I slept soundly.

The next morning I got up early, and there was mail for me. A message had come by spaceliner from the director of News Network back on Earth, personally congratulating me on my dispatches. Once, three years before, this would have meant a great deal to me. Now, I only worried that they would decide I had made the situation here newsworthy enough to require extra people being sent out to help me. I could not risk having other news personnel here now to see what I was doing.

I got in my car and headed east along the highway to New San Marcos and the Exotic Headquarters. The Friendly troops were already out in the field; eighteen kilometers east of Joseph's Town, I was stopped by a squad of five young soldiers with no non-com over them. They recognized me.

"In God's name, Mr. Olyn," said the first one to reach my car, bending down to speak to me through the open window at my left shoulder, "you cannot go through."

"Mind if I ask why?" I said.

He turned and pointed out and down into a little valley between two wooded hills at our left.

"Tactical survey in progress."

I looked. The little valley or meadow was perhaps a hundred yards wide between the wooded slopes, and it wound away from me and curved to disappear to my right. At the edge of the wooded slopes where they met open meadow, there were lilac bushes with blossoms several days old. The meadow itself was green and fair with the young chartreuse grass of early summer and the white and purple of the lilacs, and the variform oaks behind the lilacs were fuzzy in outline, with small, new leaves.

In the middle of all this, in the center of the meadow, were black-clad figures moving about with computing devices, measuring and figuring the possibilities of death from every angle. In the very center of the meadow for some reason they had set up marking stakes—a single stake, then a stake in front of that with two stakes on either side of it, and one more stake in line before these. Farther on was another single stake, down, as if fallen on the grass and discarded.

I looked back up into the lean young face of the soldier.

"Getting ready to defeat the Exotics?" I said.

He took it as if it had been a straightforward question, with no irony in my voice at all.

"Yes, sir," he said seriously. I looked at him and at the taut skin and clear eyes of the rest.

"Ever think you might lose?"

"No, Mr. Olyn." He shook his head solemnly. "No man loses who goes to battle for the Lord." He saw that I needed to be convinced, and he went about it earnestly. "He hath set His hand upon His soldiers. And all that is possible to them is victory—or sometimes death. And what is death?"

He looked to his fellow soldiers and they all nodded.

"What is death?" they echoed.

I looked at them. They stood there asking me and each other what was death as if they were talking about some hard but necessary job.

I had an answer for them, but I did not say it. Death was a Groupman, one of their own kind, giving orders to soldiers just like themselves to assassinate prisoners. That was death.

"Call an officer," I said. "My pass lets me through here."

"I regret, sir," said the one who had been talking to me, "we cannot leave our posts to summon an officer. One will come soon."

I had a hunch what "soon" meant, and I was right. It was high noon before a Force-Leader came by to order them to chow and let me through.

As I pulled into Kensie Graeme's Headquarters, the sun was low, patterning the ground with the long shadows of trees. Yet it was as if the camp was just waking up. I did not need experience to see the Exotics were beginning to move at last against Jamethon.

I found Janol Marat, the New Earth commandant.

"I've got to see Field Commander Graeme," I said.

He shook his head, for all that we now knew each other well.

"Not now, Tam. I'm sorry."

"Janol," I said, "this isn't for an interview. It's a matter of life and death. I mean that. I've got to see Kensie."

He stared at me. I stared back.

"Wait here," he said. We were standing just inside the headquarters office. He went out and was gone for perhaps five minutes. I stood, listening to the wall clock ticking away. Then he came back.

"This way," he said.

He led me outside and back between the bubble roundness of the plastic buildings to a small structure half-hidden in some trees. When we stepped through its front entrance, I realized it was Kensie's personal quarters. We passed through a small sitting room into a combination bedroom and bath. Kensie had just stepped out of the shower and was getting into battle clothes. He looked at me curiously, then turned his gaze back on Janol.

"All right, Commandant," he said, "you can get back to your duties, now."

"Sir," said Janol, without looking at me.

He saluted and left.

"All right, Tam," Kensie said, pulling on a pair of uniform slacks. "What is it?"

"I know you're ready to move out," I said.

He looked at me a little humorously as he locked the waistband of his slacks. He had not yet put on his shirt, and in that relatively small room he loomed like a giant, like some irresistible natural force. His body was tanned like dark wood and the muscles lay in flat bands across his chest and shoulders. His belly was hollow and the cords in his arms came and went as he moved them. Once more I felt the particular, special element of the Dorsai in him. It was not just his physical size and strength. It was not even the fact that he was someone trained from birth to war, someone bred for battle. No, it was something living but untouchable—the same quality of difference to be found in the pure Exotic like Padma the OutBond, or in some Newtonian or Cassidan researchist. Something so much above and beyond the common form of man that it was like a serenity, a sense of conviction where his own type of thing was concerned that was so complete it made him beyond all weaknesses, untouchable, unconquerable.

I saw the slight, dark shadow of Jamethon Black in my mind's eye, standing opposed to such a man as this; and the thought of any victory for Jamethon was unthinkable, an impossibility.

But there was always danger.

"All right, I'll tell you what I came about," I said to Kensie. "I've just found out Black's been in touch with the Blue Front, a native terrorist political group with its headquarters in Blauvain. Three of them visited him last night. I saw them."

Kensie picked up his shirt and slid a long arm into one sleeve.

"I know," he said.

I stared at him.

"Don't you understand?" I said. "They're assassins. It's their stock in trade. And the one man they and Jamethon Black both could use out of the way is you."

He put his other arm in a sleeve.

"I know that," he said. "They want the present government here on St. Marie out of the way and themselves in power—which isn't possible with Exotic money hiring us to keep the peace here."

"They haven't had Jamethon Black's help."

"Have they got it now?" he asked, sealing the shirt closure between thumb and forefinger.

"The Friendlies are desperate," I said. "Even if reinforcements arrived tomorrow, Jamethon knows what his chances are with you ready to move. Assassins may be outlawed by the Conventions of War and the Mercenaries' Code, but you and I know the Friendlies."

Kensie looked at me oddly and picked up his jacket.

"Do we?" he said.

I met his eyes. "Don't we?"

"Tam." He put on the jacket and closed it. "I know the men I have to fight. It's my business to know. But what makes you think you know them?"

"They're my business too," I said. "Maybe you'd forgotten. I'm a newsman. People are my business, first, last and always."

"But you've got no use for the Friendlies."

"Should I?" I said. "I've been on all the worlds. I've seen the Cetan entrepreneur—and he wants his margin, but he's a human being, I've seen the Newtonian and the Cassidan with their heads in the clouds, but if you yanked on their sleeves hard enough, you could pull them back to reality. I've seen Exotics like Padma at their mental parlor tricks, and the Freilander up to his ears in his own red tape. I've seen them from my own world of Old Earth, and Coby, and Venus and even from the Dorsai, like you. And I tell you they've all got one thing in common. Underneath it all they're human. Every one of them's human—they've just specialized in some one, valuable way."

"And the Friendlies haven't?"

"Fanaticism," I said. "Is that valuable? It's just the opposite. What's good—what's even permissible about blind, deaf, dumb, unthinking faith that doesn't let a man reason for himself?"

"How do you know they don't reason?" Kensie asked. He was standing facing me now.

"Maybe some of them do," I said. "Maybe the young ones, before the poison's had time to work in. What good does that do, as long as the culture exists?"

A sudden silence came into the room.

"What are you talking about?" said Kensie.

"I mean you want the assassins," I said. "You don't want the Friendly troops. Prove that Jamethon Black has broken the Conventions of War by arranging with them to kill you; and you can win St. Marie for the Exotics without firing a shot."

"And how would I do that?"

"Use me," I said. "I've got a pipeline to the political group the assassins represent. Let me go to them as your representative and outbid Jamethon. You can offer them recognition by the present government, now. Padma and the present St. Marie government heads would have to back you up if you could clean the planet of Friendlies that easily."

He looked at me with no expression at all.

"And what would I be supposed to buy with this?" he said.

"Sworn testimony they'd been hired to assassinate you. As many of them as needed could testify."

"No Court of Interplanetary Inquiry would believe people like that," Kensie said.

"Ah," I said, and I could not help smiling. "But they'd believe me as a News Network Representative when I backed up every word that was said."

There was a new silence. His face had no expression at all.

"I see," he said.

He walked past me into the salon. I followed him. He went to his phone, put his finger on a stud and spoke into an imageless, gray screen.

"Janol," he said.

He turned away from the screen, crossed the room to an arms cabinet and began putting on his battle harness. He moved deliberately and neither looked nor spoke in my direction. After a few long minutes, the building entrance slid aside and Janol stepped in.

"Sir?" said the Freilander officer.

"Mr. Olyn stays here until further orders."

"Yes, sir," said Janol.

Graeme went out.

I stood numb, staring at the entrance through which he had left. I could not believe that he would violate the Conventions so far himself as not only to disregard me, but to put me essentially under arrest to keep me from doing anything further about the situation.

I turned to Janol. He was looking at me with a sort of wry sympathy on his long, brown face.

"Is the OutBond here in camp?" I asked him.

"No." He came up to me. "He's back in the Exotic Embassy in Blauvain. Be a good fella now and sit down, why don't you? We might as well kill the next few hours pleasantly."

We were face to face; I hit him in the stomach.

I had done a little boxing as an undergraduate on the college level. I mention this not to make myself out a sort of muscular hero, but to explain why I had sense enough not to try for his jaw. Graeme could probably have found the knockout point there without even thinking, but I was no Dorsai. The area below a man's breastbone is relatively large, soft, handy and generally just fine for amateurs. And I did know something about how to punch.

For all that, Janol was not knocked out. He went over on the floor and lay there doubled up with his eyes still open. But he was not ready to get up right away. I turned and went quickly out of the building.

The camp was busy. Nobody stopped me. I got back into my car, and five minutes later I was free on the darkening road for Blauvain.

V

From New San Marcos to Blauvain and Padma's Embassy was fourteen hundred kilometers. I should have made it in six hours, but a bridge was washed out and I took fourteen.

It was after eight the following morning when I burst into the half-park, half-building that was the embassy.

"Padma—" I said. "Is he still—"

"Yes, Mr. Olyn," said the girl receptionist. "He's expecting you."

She smiled above her purple robe. I did not mind. I was too busy being glad Padma had not already taken off for the fringe areas of the conflict.

She took me down and around a corner and turned me over to a young male Exotic, who introduced himself as one of Padma's secretaries. He took me a short distance and introduced me to another secretary, a middle-aged man this time, who led me through several rooms and then directed me down a long corridor and around a corner, beyond which he said was the entrance to the office area where Padma worked at the moment. Then he left me.

I followed his direction. But when I stepped through that entrance it was not into a room, but into a further short corridor. And I checked, stopping myself dead. For what I suddenly thought I saw coming at me was Kensie Graeme—Kensie with murder on his mind.

But the man who looked like Kensie merely glanced at me and dismissed me, continuing to come on. Then I knew.

Of course, he was not Kensie. He was Kensie's twin brother, Ian, commander of Garrison Forces for the Exotics, here in Blauvain. He strode on toward me; and I began once more to walk toward him, but the shock stayed with me until we had passed one another.

I do not think anyone could have come on him like that, in my position, and not been hit the same way. From Janol, at different times, I had gathered how Ian was the converse of Kensie. Not in a military sense—they were both magnificent specimens of Dorsai officers—but in the matter of their individual natures.

Kensie had had a profound effect on me from the first moment, with his cheerful nature and the warmth of being that at times obscured the very fact that he was a Dorsai. When the pressure of military affairs was not directly on him he seemed all sunshine; you could warm yourself in his presence as you might in the sun. Ian, his physical duplicate, striding toward me like some two-eyed Odin, was all shadow.

Here at last was the Dorsai legend come to life. Here was the grim man with the iron heart and the dark and solitary soul. In the powerful fortress of his body, what was essentially Ian dwelt as isolated as a hermit on a mountain. He was the fierce and lonely Highlandman of his distant ancestry, come to life again.

Not law, not ethics, but the trust of the given word, clan-loyalty and the duty of the blood feud held sway in Ian. He was a man who would cross hell to pay a debt for good or ill; and in that moment when I saw him coming toward me and recognized him at last, I suddenly thanked whatever gods were left, that he had no debt with me.

Then we had passed each other, and he was gone around a corner.

Rumor had it, I remembered then, that the blackness around him never lightened except in Kensie's presence. That he was truly his twin brother's other half. And that if he should ever lose the light that Kensie's bright presence shed on him, he would be doomed to his own lightlessness forever.

It was a statement I was to remember at a later time, as I was to remember seeing him come toward me in that moment.

But now I forgot him as I went forward through another entrance into what looked like a small conservatory and saw the gentle face and short-cropped white hair of Padma, the OutBond, wearing a pale yellow robe.

"Come in, Mr. Olyn," he said, getting up. "And come along with me."

He turned and walked out through an archway of purple clematis blooms. I followed him, and found a small courtyard, all but filled with the elliptical shape of a sedan aircar. Padma was already climbing into one of the seats facing the controls. He held the door for me.

"Where are we going?" I asked as I got in.

He touched the autopilot panel; the ship rose in the air. He left it to its own navigation, and pivoted his chair about to face me.

"To Commander Graeme's headquarters in the field," he answered.

His eyes were a light hazel color, but they seemed to catch and swim with the sunlight striking through the transparent top of the aircar, as we reached altitude and began to move horizontally. I could not read them, or the expression on his face.

"I see," I said. "Of course, I know a call from Graeme's HQ could get to you much faster than I could by groundcar from the same spot. But I hope you aren't thinking of having him kidnap me or something like that. I have Credentials of Impartiality protecting me as a Newsman, as well as authorizations from both the Friendly and the Exotic worlds. And I don't intend to be held responsible for conclusions drawn by Graeme after the conversation the two of us had earlier this morning—*alone.*"

Padma sat still in his aircar seat, facing me. His hands were folded in his lap together, pale against the yellow robe, but with strong sinews showing under the skin of their backs.

"You're coming with me now by my decision, not Kensie Graeme's."

"I want to know why," I said tensely.

"Because," he said slowly, "you are very dangerous." And he sat still, looking at me with unwavering eyes.

I waited for him to go on, but he did not. "Dangerous?" I said. "Dangerous to who?"

"To the future of all of us."

I stared at him, then I laughed. I was angry.

"Cut it out!" I said.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes never leaving my face. I was baffled by those eyes. Innocent and open as a child's, but I could not see through them into the man himself.

"All right," I said. "Tell me, why am I dangerous?"

"Because you want to destroy a race of people. And you know how."

There was a short silence. The aircar fled on through the skies without a sound.

"Now that's an odd notion," I said slowly and calmly. "I wonder where you got it?"

"From our ontogenic calculations," said Padma, as calmly as I had spoken. "And it's not a notion, Tam. As you know yourself."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Ontogenics. I was going to look that up."

"You did look it up, didn't you, Tam?"

"Did I?" I said. "I guess I did, at that. It didn't seem very clear to me, though, as I remember. Something about evolution."

"Ontogenics," said Padma, "is the study of the effect of evolution upon the interacting forces of human society."

"Am I an interacting force?"

"At the moment and for the past several years, yes," said Padma. "And possibly for some years into the future. But possibly not."

"That sounds almost like a threat."

"In a sense it is." Padma's eyes caught the light as I watched them. "You're capable of destroying yourself as well as others."

"I'd hate to do that."

"Then," said Padma, "you'd better listen to me."

"Why, of course," I said. "That's my business, listening. Tell me all about ontogenics—and myself."

He made an adjustment in the controls, then swung his seat back to face mine once more.

"The human race," said Padma, "broke up in an evolutionary explosion at the moment in history when interstellar colonization became practical." He sat watching me. I kept my face attentive. "This happened for reasons stemming from racial instinct which we haven't completely charted yet, but which was essentially self-protective in nature."

I reached into my jacket pocket.

"Perhaps I'd better take a few notes," I said.

"If you want to," said Padma, unperturbed. "Out of that explosion came cultures individually devoted to single facets of the human personality. The fighting, combative facet became the Dorsai. The facet which surrendered the individual wholly to some faith or other became the Friendly. The philosophical facet created the Exotic culture to which I belong. We call these Splinter Cultures."

"Oh, yes," I said. "I know about Splinter Cultures."

"You know about them, Tam, but you don't know them."

"I don't?"

"No," said Padma, "because you, like all our ancestors, are from Earth. You're old, full-spectrum man. The Splinter peoples are evolutionarily advanced over you."

I felt a little twist of bitter anger knot suddenly inside me.

"Oh? I'm afraid I don't see that."

"Because you don't want to," said Padma. "If you did, you'd have to admit that they were different from you, and had to be judged by different standards."

"Different? How?"

"Different in a sense that all Splinter people, including myself, understand instinctively, but full-spectrum man has to extrapolate to imagine." Padma shifted a little in his seat. "You'll get some idea, Tam, if you imagine a member of a Splinter culture to be a man like yourself, only with a monomania that shoves him wholly toward being one type of person. But with this difference: Instead of all parts of his mental and physical self outside the limits of that monomania being ignored and atrophied as they would be with you—"

I interrupted, "Why specifically with me?"

"With any full-spectrum man, then," said Padma calmly. "These parts, instead of being atrophied, are altered to agree with and support the monomania, so that we don't have a sick man—but a healthy, different one."

"Healthy?" I said, seeing the Friendly non-com on New Earth again in my mind's eye.

"Healthy as a culture. Not as occasional crippled individuals of that culture. But as a culture."

"Sorry," I said. "I don't believe it."

"But you do, Tam," said Padma, softly. "Unconsciously you do. Because you're planning to take advantage of the weakness such a culture must have to destroy it."

"And what weakness is that?"

"The obvious weakness that's the converse of any strength," said Padma. "The Splinter Cultures are not viable."

I must have blinked. I was honestly bewildered.

"Not viable? You mean they can't live on their own?"

"Of course not," said Padma. "Faced with an expansion into space, the human race reacted to the challenge of a different environment by trying to adapt to it. It adapted by trying out separately all the elements of its personality, to see which could survive best. Now that all elements—the Splinter Cultures—have survived and adapted, it's time for them to breed back into each other again, to produce a more hardy, universe-oriented human."

The aircar began to descend. We were nearing our destination.

"What's that got to do with me?" I said, at last.

"If you frustrate one of the Splinter Cultures, it can't adapt on its own as full-spectrum man would do. It will die. And when the race breeds back to a whole, that valuable element will be lost to the race."

"Maybe it'll be no loss," I said, softly in my turn.

"A vital loss," said Padma. "And I can prove it. You, a full-spectrum man, have in you an element from every Splinter Culture. If you admit this you can identify even with those you want to destroy. I have evidence to show you. Will you look at it?"

The ship touched ground; the door beside me opened. I got out with Padma and found Kensie waiting.

I looked from Padma to Kensie, who stood with us and a head taller than I—two heads taller than the OutBond. Kensie looked back down at me with no particular expression. His eyes were not the eyes of his twin brother—but just then, for some reason, I could not meet them.

"I'm a newsman," I said. "Of course my mind is open."

Padma turned and began walking toward the headquarters building. Kensie fell in with us and I think Janol and some of the others came along behind, though I didn't look back to make sure. We went to the inner office where I first met Graeme—just Kensie, Padma and myself. There was a file folder on Graeme's desk. He picked it up, extracted a photocopy of something and handed it to me as I came up to him.

I took it. There was no doubting its authenticity.

It was a memo from Eldest Bright, ranking elder of the joint government of Harmony and Association, to the Friendly War Chief at the

Defense X Center, on Harmony. It was dated two months previously. It was on the single-molecule sheet, where the legend cannot be tampered with, or removed once it is on.

> Be Informed, in God's Name—
>
> —That since it does seem the Lord's Will that our Brothers on St. Marie make no success, it is ordered that henceforth no more replacements or personnel or supplies be sent them. For if our Captain does intend us the victory, surely we shall conquer without further expenditure. And if it be His will that we conquer not, then surely it would be an impiety to throw away the substance of God's Churches in an attempt to frustrate that Will.
>
> Be it further ordered that our Brothers on St. Marie be spared the knowledge that no further assistance is forthcoming, that they may bear witness to their faith in battle as ever, and God's Churches be undismayed.
>
> Heed this Command, in the Name of the Lord:
>
> By order of he who is called...
> Bright
> Eldest Among The Chosen

I looked up from the memo. Both Graeme and Padma were watching me.

"How'd you get hold of this?" I said. "No, of course you won't tell me." The palms of my hands were suddenly sweating so that the slick material of the sheet in my fingers was slippery. I held it tightly, and talked fast to keep their eyes on my face. "But what about it? We already knew this, everybody knew Bright had abandoned them. This just proves it. Why even bother showing it to me?"

"I thought," said Padma, "it might move you just a little. Perhaps enough to make you take a different view of things."

I said, "I didn't say that wasn't possible. I tell you a Newsman keeps an open mind at all times. Of course," I picked my words carefully, "if I could study it—"

"I'd hoped you'd take it with you," said Padma.

"Hoped?"

"If you dig into it and really understand what Bright means there, you might understand all the Friendlies differently. You might change your mind about them."

"I don't think so," I said. "But—"

"Let me ask you to do that much," said Padma. "Take the memo with you."

I stood for a moment, with Padma facing me and Kensie looming behind him, then shrugged and put the memo in my pocket.

"All right," I said. "I'll take it back to my quarters and think about it.—I've got a groundcar here somewhere, haven't I?" And I looked at Kensie.

"Ten kilometers back," said Kensie. "You wouldn't get through anyway. We're moving up for the assault and the Friendlies are maneuvering to meet us."

"Take my aircar," said Padma. "The Embassy flags on it will help."

"All right," I said.

We went out together toward the aircar. I passed Janol in the outer office and he met my eyes coldly. I did not blame him. We walked to the aircar and I got in.

"You can send the aircar back whenever you're through with it," said Padma, as I stepped in through the entrance section of its top. "It's an Embassy loan to you, Tam. I won't worry about it."

"No," I said. "You needn't worry."

I closed the section and touched the controls.

It was a dream of an aircar. It went up into the air as lightly as thought, and in a second I was two thousand feet up and well away from the spot. I made myself calm down, though, before I reached into my pocket and took the memo out.

I looked at it. My hand still trembled a little as I held it.

Here it was in my grasp at last. What I had been after from the start. And Padma himself had insisted I carry it away with me.

It was the lever, the Archimedes pry-bar which would move not one world but fourteen. And push the Friendly Peoples over the edge to extinction.

VI

They were waiting for me. They converged on the aircar as I landed it in the interior square of the Friendlies' compound, all four of them with black rifles at the ready.

They were apparently the only ones left. Black seemed to have turned out every other man of his remnant of a battle unit. And these were all men I recognized, case-hardened veterans. One was the Groupman who had been in the office that first night when I had come back from the Exotic camp and stepped in to speak to Black, asking him if he ever ordered his men to kill prisoners. Another was a forty-year-old Force-Leader, the lowest commissioned rank, but acting Major—just as Black, a Commandant, was acting as Expeditionary Field Commander—a position equivalent to Kensie Graeme's. The other two soldiers were non-commissioned, but similar. I knew them all. Ultra-fanatics. And they knew me.

We understood each other.

"I have to see the commandant," I said, as I got out, before they could begin to question me.

"On what business?" said the Force-Leader. "This aircar hath no business here. Nor thyself."

I said, "I must see Commandant Black immediately. I wouldn't be here in a car flying the flags of the Exotic Embassy if it wasn't necessary."

They could not take the chance that my reason for seeing Black wasn't important, and I knew it. They argued a little, but I kept insisting I had to see the Commandant. Finally, the Force-Leader took me across into the same outer office where I had always waited to see Black.

I faced Jamethon Black alone in the office.

He was putting on his battle harness, as I had seen Graeme putting on his earlier. On Graeme, the harness and the weapons it carried had looked like toys. On Jamethon's slight frame they looked almost too heavy to bear.

"Mr. Olyn," he said.

I walked across the room toward him, drawing the memo from my pocket as I came. He turned a little to face me, his fingers sealing the locks on his harness, jingling slightly with his weapons and his harness as he turned.

"You're taking the field against the Exotics," I said.

He nodded. I had never been this close to him before. From across the room I would have believed he was holding his usual stony expression, but standing just a few feet from him now I saw the tired wraith of a smile touch the corners of his straight mouth in that dark, young face, for a second.

"That is my duty, Mr. Olyn."

"Some duty," I said. "When your superiors back on Harmony have already written you off their books."

"I've already told you," he said, calmly. "The Chosen are not betrayed in the Lord, one by another."

"You're sure of that?" I said.

Once more I saw that little ghost of a weary smile.

"It's a subject, Mr. Olyn, on which I am more expert than you."

I looked into his eyes. They were exhausted but calm. I glanced aside at the desk where the picture of the church, the older man and woman and the young girl stood still.

"Your family?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"It seems to me you'd think of them in a time like this."

"I think of them quite often."

"But you're going to go out and get yourself killed just the same."

"Just the same," he said.

"Sure!" I said. "You would!" I had come in calm and in control of myself. But now it was as if a cork had been pulled on all that had been inside me since Dave's death. I began to shake. "Because that's the kind of hypocrites you are—all of you Friendlies. You're so lying, so rotten clear through with your own lies, if someone took them away from you there'd be nothing left. Would there? So you'd rather die now than admit committing suicide like this isn't the most glorious thing in the universe. You'd rather die than admit you're just as full of doubts as anyone else, just as afraid."

I stepped right up to him. He did not move.

"Who're you trying to fool?" I said. "Who? I see through you just like the people on all the other worlds do! I know you know what a mumbo-jumbo your United Churches are. I know you know the way of life you sing of through your nose so much isn't what you claim it is. I know your Eldest Bright and his gang of narrow-minded old men are just a gang of world-hungry tyrants that don't give a damn for religion or anything as long as they get what they want. I know you know it—and I'm going to make you admit it!"

And I shoved the memo under his nose.

"Read it!"

He took it from me. I stepped back from him, shaking badly as I watched him.

He studied it for a long minute, while I held my breath. His face did not change. Then he handed it back to me.

"Can I give you a ride to meet Graeme?" I said. "We can get across the lines in the OutBond's aircar. You can get the surrender over with before any shooting breaks out."

He shook his head. He was looking at me in a particularly level way, with an expression I could not understand.

"What do you mean—no?"

"You'd better stay here," he said. "Even with ambassadorial flags, that aircar may be shot at over the lines." And he turned as if he would walk away from me, out the door.

"Where're you going?" I shouted at him. I got in front of him and pushed the memo before his eyes again. "That's real. You can't close your eyes to that!"

He stopped and looked at me. Then he reached out and took my wrist and put my arm and hand with the memo aside. His fingers were thin, but much stronger than I thought, so that I let the arm go down in front of him when I hadn't intended to do so.

"I know it's real. I'll have to warn you not to interfere with me any more, Mr. Olyn. I've got to go now." He stepped past me and walked toward the door.

"You're a liar!" I shouted after him. He kept on going. I had to stop him. I grabbed the solidograph from his desk and smashed it on the floor.

He turned like a cat and looked at the broken pieces at my feet.

"That's what you're doing!" I shouted, pointing at them.

He came back without a word and squatted down and carefully gathered up the pieces, one by one. He put them into his pocket and got back to his feet, and raised his face at last to mine. And when I saw his eyes I stopped breathing.

"If my duty," he said, in a low, controlled voice, "were not in this minute to—"

His voice stopped. I saw his eyes staring into me; and slowly I saw them change and the murder that was in them soften into something like wonder.

"Thou—" he said, softly—"Thou hast *no* faith?"

I had opened my mouth to speak. But what he said stopped me. I stood as if punched in the stomach, without the breath for words. He stared at me.

"What made you think," he said, "that that memo would change my mind?"

"You read it!" I said. "Bright wrote you were a losing proposition here, so you weren't to get any more help. And no one was to tell you for fear you might surrender if you knew."

"Is that how you read it?" he said. "Like that?"

"How else? How else can you read it?"

"As it is written." He stood straight facing me now and his eyes never moved from mine. "You have read it without faith, leaving out the Name and the will of the Lord. Eldest Bright wrote not that we were to be abandoned here—but that since our cause was sore tried, we be put in the hands of our Captain and our God. And further he wrote that we should not be told of this, that none here should be tempted to a vain and special seeking of the martyr's crown. Look, Mr. Olyn. It's down there in black and white."

"But that's not what he meant! *That's not what he meant!*"

He shook his head. "Mr. Olyn, I can't leave you in such delusion."

I stared at him, for it was sympathy I saw in his face. For me.

"It's your own blindness that deludes you," he said. "You see nothing, and so believe no man can see. Our Lord is not just a name, but all things. That's why we have no ornament in our churches, scorning any painted screen between us and our God. Listen to me, Mr. Olyn. Those churches themselves are but tabernacles of the earth. Our Elders and Leaders, though they are Chosen and Anointed, are still but mortal men. To none of these things or people do we hearken in our faith, but to the very voice of God within us."

He paused. Somehow I could not speak.

"Suppose it was even as you think," he went on, even more gently. "Suppose that all you say was a fact; and that our Elders were but greedy tyrants, ourselves abandoned here by their selfish will and set to fulfill a false and prideful purpose. No." Jamethon's voice rose. "Let me attest as if it were only for myself. Suppose that you could give me proof that all our Elders lied, that our very Covenant was false. Suppose that you could prove to me—" his face lifted to mine and his voice drove at me—"that all was perversion and falsehood, and nowhere among the Chosen, not even in the house of my father, was there faith or hope! If you could prove to me that no miracle could save me, that no soul stood with me—and that opposed were all the legions of the universe—still I, I *alone,* Mr. Olyn, would go forward as I have been commanded, to the end of the universe, to the culmination of eternity. For without my faith I am but common earth. But with my faith, there is no power can stay me!"

He stopped speaking and turned about. I watched him walk across the room and out the door.

Still I stood there, as if I had been fastened in place—until I heard from outside, in the square of the compound, the sound of a military aircar starting up.

I broke out of my stasis then and ran out of the building.

As I burst into the square, the military aircar was just taking off. I could see Black and his four hard-shell subordinates in it. And I yelled up into the air after them.

"That's all right for you, but what about your men?"

They could not hear me. I knew that. Uncontrollable tears were running down my face, but I screamed up into the air after him anyway—

"You're killing your men to prove your point! Can't you listen? You're murdering helpless men!"

Unheeding, the military aircar dwindled rapidly to the west and south, where the converging battle forces waited. And the heavy concrete walls and buildings about the empty compound threw back my words with a hollow, wild and mocking echo.

VII

I should have gone to the spaceport. Instead, I got back into the aircar and flew back across the lines looking for Graeme's Battle Command Center.

I was as little concerned about my own life just then as a Friendly. I think I was shot at once or twice, in spite of the ambassadorial flags on the aircar, but I don't remember exactly. Eventually I found the Command Center and descended.

Enlisted men surrounded me as I stepped out of the aircar. I showed my credentials and went up to the battle screen, which had been set up in open air at the edge of shadow from some tall variform oaks. Graeme, Padma and his whole staff were grouped around it, watching the movements of their own and the Friendly troops reported on it. A continual low-voiced discussion of the movements went on, and a steady stream of information came from the communications center fifteen feet off.

The sun slanted steeply through the trees. It was almost noon and the day was bright and warm. No one looked at me for a long time; and then Janol, turning away from the screen, caught sight of me standing off at one side by the flat-topped shape of a tactics computer. His face went cold. He went on about what he was doing. But I must have been looking pretty bad, because after a while he came by with a canteen cup and set it down on the computer top.

"Drink that," he said shortly, and went off. I picked it up, found it was Dorsai whisky and swallowed it down. I could not taste it; but evidently it did me some good, because in a few minutes the world began to sort itself out around me and I began to think again.

I went up to Janol. "Thanks."

"All right." He did not look at me, but went on with the papers on the field desk before him.

"Janol," I said. "Tell me what's going on."

"See for yourself," he said, still bent over his papers.

"I can't see for myself. You know that. Look—I'm sorry about what I did. But this is my job, too. Can't you tell me what's going on now and fight with me afterwards?"

"You know I can't brawl with civilians." Then his face relaxed. "All right," he said, straightening up. "Come on."

He led me over to the battle screen, where Padma and Kensie were standing, and pointed to a sort of small triangle of darkness between two snakelike lines of light. Other spots and shapes of light ringed it about.

"These—" he pointed to the two snakelike lines—"are the Macintok and Sarah Rivers, where they come together—just about ten miles this side of Joseph's Town. It's fairly high ground, hills thick with cover, fairly open between them. Good territory for setting up a stubborn defense, bad area to get trapped in."

"Why?"

He pointed to the two river lines.

"Get backed up in here and you find yourself hung up on high bluffs over the river. There is no easy way across, no cover for retreating troops. It's nearly all open farmland the rest of the way, from the other sides of the rivers to Joseph's Town."

His finger moved back out from the point where the river lines came together, past the small area of darkness and into the surrounding shapes and rings of light.

"On the other hand, the approach to this territory from our position is through open country, too—narrow strips of farmland interspersed with a lot of swamp and marsh. It's a tight situation for either commander, if we commit to a battle here. The first one who has to backpedal will find himself in trouble in a hurry."

"Are you going to commit?"

"It depends. Black sent his light armor forward. Now he's pulling back into the high ground, between the rivers. We're far superior in strength and equipment. There's no reason for us not to go in after him, as long as he's trapped himself—" Janol broke off.

"No reason?" I asked.

"Not from a tactical standpoint." Janol frowned at the screen. "We couldn't get into trouble unless we suddenly had to retreat. And we wouldn't do that unless he suddenly acquired some great tactical advantage that'd make it impossible for us to stay there."

I looked at his profile.

"Such as losing Graeme?" I said.

He transferred his frown to me. "There's no danger of that."

There was a certain change in the movement and the voices of the people around us. We both turned and looked.

Everybody was clustering around a screen. We moved in with the crowd and, looking between the soldiers of two of the officers of Graeme's staff, I saw on the screen the image of a small grassy meadow enclosed by wooded hills. In the center of the meadow, the Friendly flag floated its thin black cross on white background beside a long table on the grass. There were folding chairs on each side of the table, but only one person—a Friendly officer, standing on the table's far side as if waiting. There were the lilac bushes along the edge of the wooded hills where they came down in variform oak and ash to the meadow's edge; and the lavender blossoms were beginning to brown and darken, for their season was almost at an end. So much difference had twenty-four hours made. Off to the left of the screen I could see the gray concrete of a highway.

"I know that place—" I started to say, turning to Janol.

"Quiet!" he said, holding up a finger. Around us, everybody else had fallen still. Up near the front of our group a single voice was talking.

"—it's a truce table."

"Have they called?" said the voice of Kensie.

"No, sir."

"Well, let's go see." There was a stir up front. The group began to break up and I saw Kensie and Padma walking off toward the area where the aircars were parked. I shoved myself through the thinning crowd like a process server, running after them.

I heard Janol shout behind me, but I paid no attention. Then I was up to Kensie and Padma, who turned.

"I want to go with you," I said.

"It's all right, Janol," Kensie said, looking past me. "You can leave him with us."

"Yes, sir." I could hear Janol turn and leave.

"So you want to come with me, Mr. Olyn?" Kensie said.

"I know that spot," I told him. "I drove by it just earlier today. The Friendlies were taking tactical measurements all over that meadow and the hills on both sides. They weren't setting up truce talks."

Kensie looked at me for a long moment, as if he was taking some tactical measurements himself.

"Come on, then," he said. He turned to Padma. "You'll be staying here?"

"It's a combat zone. I'd better not." Padma turned his unwrinkled face to me. "Good luck, Mr. Olyn," he said, and walked away. I watched his yellow-robed figure glide over the turf for a second, then turned to see Graeme halfway to the nearest military aircar. I hurried after him.

It was a battle car, not luxurious like the OutBond's, and Kensie did not cruise at two thousand feet, but snaked it between the trees just a few feet above ground. The seats were cramped. His big frame over-filled his, crowding me where I sat. I felt the butt-plate of his spring pistol grinding into my side with every movement he made on the controls.

We came at last to the edge of the wooded and hilly triangle occupied by the Friendlies and mounted a slope under the cover of the new-leaved variform oaks.

They were massive enough to have killed off most ground cover. Between their pillar-like trunks the ground was shaded, and padded with the brown shapes of dead leaves. Near the crest of the hill, we came upon a unit of Exotic troops resting and waiting the orders to advance. Kensie got out of the car and returned the Force-Leader's salute.

"You've seen these tables the Friendlies set up?" Kensie asked.

"Yes, Commander. That officer they've got is still standing there. If you go just up over the crest of the slope here, you can see him—and the furniture."

"Good," said Kensie. "Keep your men here, Force. The Newsman and I'll go take a look."

He led the way up among the oak trees. At the top of the hill we looked down through about fifty yards more of trees and out into the meadow. It was two hundred yards across, the table right in the middle, the unmoving black figure of the Friendly officer standing on its far side.

"What do you think of it, Mr. Olyn?" asked Kensie, looking down through the trees.

"Why hasn't somebody shot him?" I asked.

He glanced sideways at me.

"There's plenty of time to shoot him," he said, "before he can get back to cover on the far side. If we have to shoot him at all. That wasn't what I wanted to know. You've seen the Friendly commander recently. Did he give you the impression he was ready to surrender?"

"No!" I said.

"I see," said Kensie.

"You don't really think he means to surrender? What makes you think something like that?"

"Truce tables are generally set up for the discussion of terms between opposing forces," he said.

"But he hasn't asked you to meet him?"

"No." Kensie watched the figure of the Friendly officer, motionless in the sunlight. "It might be against his principles to call for a discussion, but not to discuss—if we just happened to find ourselves across a table from one another."

He turned and signaled with his hand. The Force-Leader, who had been waiting down the slope behind us, came up.

"Sir?" he said to Kensie.

"Any Friendly strength in those trees across the way?"

"Four men, that's all, sir, Our scopes pick out their body heats clear and sharp. They aren't attempting to hide."

"I see." He paused. "Force."

"Sir?"

"Be good enough to go down there in the meadow and ask that Friendly officer what this is all about."

"Yes, sir."

We stood and watched as the Force-Leader went stiff-legging it down the steep slope between the trees. He crossed the grass—it seemed very slowly—and came up to the Friendly officer.

They stood facing each other. They were talking but there was no way to hear their voices. The flag with its thin black cross whipped in the little breeze that was blowing there. Then the Force-Leader turned and climbed back toward us.

He stopped in front of Kensie, and saluted. "Commander," he said, "the Commander of the Chosen Troops of God will meet with you in the field to discuss a surrender." He stopped to draw a fresh breath. "If you'll show yourself at the edge of the opposite woods at the same time; and you can approach the table together."

"Thank you, Force-Leader," said Kensie. He looked past his officer at the field and the table. "I think I'll go down."

"He doesn't mean it," I said.

"Force-Leader," said Kensie. "Form your men ready, just under the crown of the slope on the back side, here. If he surrenders, I'm going to insist he come back with me to this side immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"All this business without a regular call for parley may be because he wants to surrender first and break the news of it to his troops afterwards. So get your men ready. If Black intends to present his officers with an accomplished fact, we don't want to let him down."

"He's not going to surrender," I said.

"Mr. Olyn," said Kensie, turning to me. "I suggest you go back behind the crest of the hill. The Force-Leader will see you're taken care of."

"No," I said. "I'm going down. If it's a truce parley to discuss surrender terms, there's no combat situation involved and I've got a perfect right to be there. If it isn't, what're you doing going down yourself?"

Kensie looked at me strangely for a moment.

"All right," he said. "Come with me."

Kensie and I turned and went down the sharply pitched slope between the trees. Our boot-soles slipped until our heels dug in, with every step downward. Coming through the lilacs I smelled the faint, sweet scent—almost gone now—of the decaying blossoms.

Across the meadow, directly in line with the table, four figures in black came forward as we came forward. One of them was Jamethon Black.

Kensie and Jamethon saluted each other.

"Commandant Black," said Kensie.

"Yes, Commander Graeme. I am indebted to you for meeting me here," said Jamethon.

"My duty and a pleasure, Commandant."

"I wished to discuss the terms of a surrender."

"I can offer you," said Kensie, "the customary terms extended to troops in your position under the Mercenaries' Code."

"You misunderstand me, sir," said Jamethon. "It was your surrender I came here to discuss."

The flag snapped.

Suddenly I saw the men in black measuring the field here, as I had seen them the day before. They had been right where we were now.

"I'm afraid the misunderstanding is mutual, Commandant," said Kensie. "I am in a superior tactical position and your defeat is normally certain. I have no need to surrender."

"You will not surrender?"

"No," said Kensie strongly.

All at once I saw the five stakes, in the position the Friendly non-coms, officers and Jamethon were now, and the stake up in front of them fallen down.

"Look out!" I shouted at Kensie—but I was far too late.

Things had already begun to happen. The Force-Leader had jerked back in front of Jamethon and all five of them were drawing their sidearms. I heard the flag snap again, and the sound of its rolling seemed to go on for a long time.

For the first time then I saw a man of the Dorsai in action. So swift was Kensie's reaction that it was eerily as if he had read Jamethon's mind in the instant before the Friendlies began to reach for their weapons. As their hands touched their sidearms, he was already in movement forward over the table and his spring pistol was in his hand. He seemed to fly directly into the Force-Leader and the two of them went down together, but Kensie kept traveling. He rolled on off the Force-Leader, who now lay still in the grass. He came to his knees, fired, and dived forward, rolling again.

The Groupman on Jamethon's right went down. Jamethon and the remaining two were turned nearly full about now, trying to keep Kensie before them. The two that were left shoved themselves in front of Jamethon, their weapons not yet aimed. Kensie stopped moving as if he had run into a stone wall, came to his feet in a crouch, and fired twice more. The two Friendlies fell apart, one to each side.

Jamethon was facing Kensie now, and Jamethon's pistol was in his hand and aimed. Jamethon fired, and a light blue streak leaped through the air, but Kensie had dropped again. Lying on his side on the grass, propped on one elbow, he pressed the firing button on his spring pistol twice.

Jamethon's sidearm sagged in his hand. He was backed up against the table now, and he put out his free hand to steady himself against the table top. He made another effort to lift his sidearm but he could not. It dropped from his hand. He bore more of his weight on the table, half-turning around, and his face came about to look in my direction. His face was as controlled as it had ever been, but there was something different about his eyes as he looked into mine and recognized me—something oddly like the look a man gives a competitor whom he had just beaten, and who was no real threat to begin with. A little smile touched the corners of his thin lips. Like a smile of inner triumph.

"Mr. Olyn..." he whispered. And then the life went out of his face and he fell beside the table.

Nearby explosions shook the ground under my feet. From the crest of the hill behind us the Force-Leader whom Kensie had left there was firing smoke bombs between us and the Friendly side of the meadow. A gray wall of smoke was rising between us and the far hillside, to screen us from the enemy. It towered up the blue sky like some impassable barrier, and under the looming height of it, only Kensie and I were standing.

On Jamethon's dead face there was a faint smile.

VIII

In a daze I watched the Friendly troops surrender that same day. It was the one situation in which their officers felt justified in doing so.

Not even their Elders expected subordinates to fight a situation set up by a dead Field Commander for tactical reasons unexplained to his officers. And the live troops remaining were worth more than the indemnity charges for them that the Exotics would make.

I did not wait for the settlements. I had nothing to wait for. One moment the situation on this battlefield had been poised like some great, irresistible wave above all our heads, cresting, curling over and about to break downward with an impact that would reverberate through all the worlds of Man. Now, suddenly, it was no longer above us. There was nothing but a far-flooding silence, already draining away into the records of the past.

There was nothing for me. Nothing.

If Jamethon had succeeded in killing Kensie—even if as a result he had won a practically bloodless surrender of the Exotic troops—I might have done something damaging with the incident of the truce table. But he had only tried; and died, failing. Who could work up emotion against the Friendlies for that?

I took ship back to Earth like a man walking in a dream, asking myself why.

Back on Earth, I told my editors I was not in good shape physically; and they took one look at me and believed me. I took an indefinite leave from my job and sat around the News Network Center Library, at the Hague, searching blindly through piles of writings and reference material on the Friendlies, the Dorsai and the Exotic worlds. For what? I did not know. I also watched the news dispatches from St. Marie concerning the settlement, and drank too much while I watched.

I had the numb feeling of a soldier sentenced to death for failure on duty. Then in the news dispatches came the information that Jamethon's body would be returned to Harmony for burial; and I realized suddenly it was this I had been waiting for: The unnatural honoring by fanatics of the fanatic who with four henchmen had tried to assassinate the lone enemy commander under a truce flag. Things could still be written.

I shaved, showered, pulled myself together after a fashion and went to see my superiors about being sent to Harmony to cover the burial of Jamethon, as a wrap-up.

The congratulations of the Director of News Network, that had reached me on St. Marie earlier, stood me in good stead. It was still fresh in the minds of the men just over me. I was sent.

Five days later I was on Harmony, in a little town called Remembered-of-the-Lord. The buildings in the town were of concrete and bubble plastic, though evidently they had been up for many years. The thin, stony soil about the town had been tilled as the fields on St. Marie had been tilled when I got to that other world—for Harmony now was just entering the spring of its northern hemisphere. And it was raining as I drove from the spaceport of the town, as it had on St. Marie that first day. But the Friendly fields I saw did not show the rich darkness of the fields of St. Marie. Only a thin, hard blackness in the wet that was like the color of Friendly uniforms.

I got to the church just as people were beginning to arrive. Under the dark, draining skies, the interior of the church was almost too dim to let me see my way about—for the Friendlies permit themselves no windows and no artificial lighting in their houses of worship. Gray light, cold wind and rain entered the doorless portal at the back of the church. Through the single rectangular opening in the roof watery sunlight filtered over Jamethon's body, on a platform set up on trestles. A transparent cover had been set up to protect the body from the rain, which was channeled off the open space and ran down a drain in the back wall. But the elder conducting the Death Service and anyone coming up to view the body were expected to stand exposed to sky and weather.

I got in line with the people moving slowly down the central aisle and past the body. To right and left of me the barriers at which the congregation would stand during the service were lost in gloom. The rafters of the steeply pitched roof were hidden in darkness. There was no music, but the low sound of voices individually praying to either side of me in the ranks of barriers and in the line blended into a sort of rhythmic undertone of sadness. Like Jamethon, the people were all very dark here, being of North African extraction. Dark into dark, they blended, and were lost about me in the gloom.

I came up and passed at last by Jamethon. He looked as I remembered him. Death had had no power to change him. He lay on his back, his hands at his sides, and his lips were as firm and straight as ever. Only his eyes were closed.

I was limping noticeably because of the dampness, and as I turned away from the body, I felt my elbow touched. I turned back sharply. I was not wearing my correspondent's uniform. I was in civilian clothes, so as to be inconspicuous.

I looked down into the face of the young girl in Jamethon's solidograph. In the gray rainy light her unlined face was like something from the stained glass window of an ancient cathedral back on Old Earth.

"You've been wounded," she said in a soft voice to me. "You must be one of the mercenaries who knew him on Newton, before he was ordered to Harmony. His parents, who are mine as well, would find solace in the Lord by meeting you."

The wind blew rain down through the overhead opening all about me, and its icy feel sent a chill suddenly shooting through me, freezing me to my very bones.

"No!" I said. "I'm not. I didn't know him." And I turned sharply away from her and pushed my way into the crowd, back up the aisle.

After about fifteen feet, I realized what I was doing and slowed down. The girl was already lost in the darkness of the bodies behind me. I made my way more slowly toward the back of the church, where there was a little place to stand before the first ranks of the barriers began. I stood watching the people come in. They came and came, walking in in their black clothing with their heads down and talking or praying in low voices.

I stood where I was, a little back from the entrance, half numbed and dull-minded with the chill about me and the exhaustion I had brought with me from Earth. The voices droned about me. I almost dozed, standing there. I could not remember why I had come.

Then a girl's voice emerged from the jumble, bringing me back to full consciousness again.

"—he did deny it, but I am sure he is one of those mercenaries who was with Jamethon on Newton. He limps and can only be a soldier who hath been wounded."

It was the voice of Jamethon's sister, speaking with more of the Friendly cant on her tongue than she had used speaking to me, a stranger. I woke fully and saw her standing by the entrance only a few feet from me, half-facing two elder people who I recognized as the older couple in Jamethon's solidograph. A bolt of pure, freezing horror shot through me.

"No!" I nearly shouted at them. "I don't know him. I never knew him—I don't understand what you're talking about!" And I turned and bolted out through the entrance of the church into the concealing rain.

I all but ran for about thirty or forty feet. Then I heard no footsteps behind me; I stopped.

I was alone in the open. The day was even darker now and the rain suddenly came down harder. It obscured everything around me with a drumming, shimmering curtain. I could not even see the groundcars in the parking lot toward which I was facing; and for sure they could not see me from the church. I lifted my face up to the downpour and let it beat upon my cheeks and my closed eyelids.

"So," said a voice from behind me. "You did not know him?"

The words seemed to cut me down the middle, and I felt as a cornered wolf must feel. Like a wolf I turned.

"Yes, I knew him!" I said.

Facing me was Padma, in a blue robe the rain did not seem to dampen. His empty hands that had never held a weapon in their life were clasped together before him. But the wolf part of me knew that as far as I was concerned, he was armed and a hunter.

"You?" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"It was calculated you would be here," said Padma, softly. "So I am here, too. But why *are* you here, Tam? Among those people in there, there's sure to be at least a few fanatics who've heard the camp rumors of your responsibility in the matter of Jamethon's death and the Friendlies' surrender."

"Rumors!" I said. "Who started them?"

"You did," Padma said. "By your actions on St. Marie." He gazed at me. "Didn't you know that you were risking your life, coming here today?"

I opened my mouth to deny it. Then I realized I had known.

"What if someone should call out to them," said Padma, "that Tam Olyn, the St. Marie campaign Newsman, is here incognito?"

I looked at him with my wolf-feeling, grimly.

"Can you square it with your Exotic principles if you do?"

"We are misunderstood," answered Padma calmly. "We hire soldiers to fight for us not because of some moral commandment, but because our emotional perspective is lost if we become involved."

There was no fear left in me. Only a hard, empty feeling.

"Then call them," I said.

Padma's strange, hazel eyes watched me through the rain.

"If that was all that was needed," he said. "I could have sent word to them. I wouldn't have needed to come myself."

"Why did you come?" My voice tore at my throat. "What do you care about me, or the Exotics?"

"We care for every individual," said Padma. "But we care more for the race. And you remain dangerous to it. You're an idealist, Tam, warped to destructive purpose. There is a law of conservation of energy in the pattern of cause-and-effect as in other sciences. Your destructiveness was frustrated on St. Marie. Now it may turn inward to destroy you, or outward against the whole race of man."

I laughed, and heard the harshness of my laughter.

"What're you going to do about it?" I said.

"Show you how the knife you hold cuts the hand that holds it as well as what you turn it against. I have news for you, Tam. Kensie Graeme is dead."

"Dead?" The rain seemed to roar around me suddenly and the parking lot shifted unsubstantially under my feet.

"He was assassinated by three men of the Blue Front in Blauvain five days ago."

"Assassinated..." I whispered. "Why?"

"Because the war was over," said Padma. "Because Jamethon's death and the surrender of the Friendly troops without the preliminary of a war that would tear up the countryside left the civilian population favorably disposed toward our troops. Because the Blue Front found themselves farther from power than ever, as a result of this favorable feeling. They hoped by killing Graeme to provoke his troops into retaliation against the civilian population, so that the St. Marie government would have to order them home to our Exotics, and stand unprotected to face a Blue Front revolt."

I stared at him.

"All things are interrelated," said Padma. "Kensie was slated for a final promotion to a desk command back on Mara or Kultis. He and his brother Ian would have been out of the wars for the rest of their professional lives. Because of Jamethon's death, that allowed the surrender of his troops without fighting, a situation was set up which led the Blue Front to assassinate Kensie. If you and Jamethon had not come together on St. Marie, and Jamethon had won, Kensie would still be alive. So our calculations show."

"Jamethon and I?" The breath went dry in my throat without warning, and the rain came down harder.

"You were the factor," said Padma, "that helped Jamethon to his solution."

"I helped him!" I said. "*I* did?"

"He saw through you," said Padma. "He saw through the revenge-bitter, twisted surface you thought was yourself, to the idealistic core that was so deep in the bone of you that even your uncle hadn't been able to eradicate it."

The rain thundered between us. But Padma's every word came clearly through it to me.

"I don't believe you!" I shouted. "I don't believe he did anything like that!"

"I told you," said Padma, "you didn't fully appreciate the evolutionary advances of our Splinter Cultures. Jamethon's faith was not the kind that can be shaken by outer things. If you had been in fact like your uncle, he would not even have listened to you. He would have dismissed you as a soulless man. As it was, he thought of you instead as a man possessed. A man speaking with what he would have called Satan's voice."

"I don't believe it!" I yelled.

"You do believe it," said Padma. "You've got no choice except to believe it. Because only because of it could Jamethon find his solution."

"Solution!"

"He was a man ready to die for his faith. But as a commander he found it hard his men should go out to die for no other reasonable cause." Padma watched me, and the rain thinned for a moment. "But you offered him what he recognized as the devil's choice—his life in this world, if he would surrender his faith and his men, to avoid the conflict that would end in his death and theirs."

"What crazy thinking was that?" I said. Inside the church, the praying had stopped, and a single strong, deep voice was beginning the burial service.

"Not crazy," said Padma. "The moment he realized this, his answer became simple. All he had to do was begin by denying whatever the Satan offered. He must start with the absolute necessity of his own death."

"And that was a solution?" I tried to laugh but my throat hurt.

"It was the only solution," said Padma. "Once he decided that, he saw immediately that the one situation in which his men would permit themselves to surrender was if he was dead and they were in an untenable position for reasons only he had known."

I felt the words go through me with a soundless shock.

"But he didn't mean to die!" I said.

"He left it to his God," said Padma. "He arranged it so only a miracle could save him."

"What're you talking about?" I stared at him. "He set up a table with a flag of truce. He took four men—"

"There was no flag. The men were overage, martyrdom-seekers."

"He took four!" I shouted. "Four and one made five. The five of them against one man. I stood there by that table and saw. Five against—"

"Tam."

The single word stopped me. Suddenly I began to be afraid. I did not want to hear what he was about to say. I was afraid I knew what he was going to tell me. That I had known it for some time. And I did not want to hear it, I did not want to hear him say it. The rain grew even stronger, driving upon us both and mercilessly on the concrete, but I heard every word relentlessly through all its sound and noise.

Padma's voice began to roar in my ears like the rain, and a feeling came over me like the helpless floating sensation that comes in high fever. "Did you think that Jamethon for a minute fooled himself? He was a product of a Splinter Culture. He recognized another in Kensie. Did you think that for a minute he thought that barring a miracle he and four overage fanatics could kill an armed, alert and ready man of the Dorsai—a man like Kensie Graeme? Before they were gunned down and killed themselves?"

Themselves…themselves…themselves…

I rode off a long way on that word from the dark day and the rain. Like the rain and the wind behind the clouds it lifted me and carried me away at last to that high, hard and stony land I had glimpsed when I had asked Kensie Graeme that question about his ever allowing Friendly prisoners to be killed. It was this land I had always avoided, but to it I was come at last.

And I remembered…

From the beginning, I had known inside myself that the fanatic who had killed Dave and the others was not the image of all Friendlies. Jamethon was no casual killer. I had tried to make him into one in order to hide my own shame, my own self-destruction. For three years I had lied to myself. It had not been with me as I claimed, at Dave's death.

I had sat there under that tree watching Dave and the others die, watching the black-clad Groupman killing them with his machine rifle. And, in that moment, the thought in my mind had not been the one with which I justified three years of hunting for an opportunity to ruin someone like Jamethon and destroy the Friendly peoples.

It had not been me, thinking, *what is he doing there, what is he doing to those helpless, innocent men!* I had thought nothing so noble. Only one thought had filled all my mind and body in that instant. It had been simply— *after he's done, is he going to turn that gun on me?*

I came back to the day and to the rain. The rain was slackening and Padma was holding me upright. As with Jamethon, I was amazed at the strength of his hands.

"Let me go," I mumbled.

"Where would you go, Tam?" said Padma.

"Any place," I muttered. "I'll get out of it. I'll go hole up somewhere and get out of it. I'll give up."

"An action," said Padma, letting me go, "goes on reverberating for ever. Cause never ceases its effects. You can't let go now, Tam. You can only change sides."

"Sides!" I said. The rain was dwindling fast. "What sides?" I stared at him drunkenly.

"Your uncle's side, which is one," said Padma. "And the opposing side, which is yours—which is ours as well." The rain was falling only lightly now, and the day was lightening. A little pale sunlight worked through thin clouds and illuminated the space between us. "In addition there are two strong influences besides we Exotics concerned with the attempt of man to evolve. We can't calculate or understand them yet, beyond the fact they act almost as single powerful individual wills. One seems to try to aid, one to frustrate, the evolutionary process; and their influences can be traced back at least as far as man's first venture into space from Earth."

I shook my head.

"I don't understand it," I muttered. "It's not my business."

"It is. It has been all your life." Padma's eyes caught light for a moment. "A force intruded on the pattern on St. Marie, in the shape of a unit warped by personal loss and oriented toward violence. That was you, Tam."

I tried to shake my head again, but I knew he was right.

"You are blocked in your effort," said Padma. "But the law of conservation of energies could not be denied. When you were frustrated by Jamethon, your force, transmuted, left the pattern in the unit of another individual, warped by personal loss and oriented toward violent effect on the fabric."

I stared at him and wet my lips. "What other individual?"

"Ian Graeme."

I stared at him.

"Ian found his brother's three assassins hiding in a hotel room in Blauvain. He killed them with his hands—and in doing that he calmed the mercenaries and frustrated the Blue Front. But then he resigned and went home to the Dorsai. He's charged now with the sense of loss and bitterness you were charged with when you came to St. Marie." Padma paused and added softly, "Now he has great causal potential for some purpose we can't yet calculate."

"But—" I looked at Padma. "You mean I'm free!"

Padma shook his head.

"You're only charged with a different force instead," he said. "You received the full impact and charge of Jamethon's self-sacrifice."

He looked at me almost with sympathy, and in spite of the sunlight I began to shiver.

It was so. I could not deny it. Jamethon, in giving his life up for a belief, when I had thrown away all belief before the face of death, had melted and changed me as lightning melts and changes the uplifted sword-blade that it strikes. I could not deny what had happened to me.

"No," I said, shivering, "I can't do anything about it."

"You can," said Padma, calmly. "You will."

He unclasped his hands that he had held together earlier.

"The purpose for which we calculated I should meet you here is accomplished now," he said. "The idealism which was basic in you remains. Even your uncle couldn't take it from you. He could only attack it so that the threat of death on New Earth could twist it for a while against itself. Now you've been hammered straight in the forge of events on St. Marie."

I laughed, and the laugh hurt my throat still.

"I don't feel straight," I said.

"Give yourself time," said Padma. "Healing takes time. New growth has to harden, like muscle, before it becomes useful. Now you understand much more about the faith of the Friendlies, the courage of the Dorsai—and something of the philosophical strength for man we work toward on the Exotics."

He stopped and smiled at me. Almost an impish smile.

"It should have been clear to you a long while ago, Tam," he said. "Your job's the job of translator—between the old and the new. Your work will prepare the minds of the people on all the worlds—full-spectrum and Splinter Culture alike—for the day when the talents of the race will combine into the new breed." The smile softened, his face saddened. "You'll live to see more of it than I. Good-by, Tam."

He turned. Through the still misty, but brightening air, I saw him walking alone toward the church, from which came the voice of the speaker within, now announcing the number of the final hymn.

Dazedly, I turned away myself, went to my car and got in. Now the rain was almost over and the sky was brightening fast. The faint moisture fell, it seemed, more kindly; and the air was fresh and new.

I put the car windows open as I pulled out of the lot onto the long road back to the spaceport. And through the open window beside me I heard them beginning to sing the final hymn inside the church.

It was the Battle Hymn of the Friendly Soldiers that they sang. As I drove away down the road the voices seemed to follow me strongly. Not sounding slowly and mournfully as if in sadness and farewell, but strongly and triumphantly, as in a marching song on the lips of those taking up a route at the beginning of a new day.

Soldier, ask not—now or ever!—
Where to war your banners go!

The singing followed me as I drove away. And as I got farther into the distance, the voices seemed to blend until they sounded like one voice alone, powerfully singing. Ahead, the clouds were breaking. With the sun shining through, the patches of blue sky were like bright flags waving—like the banners of an army, marching forever forward into lands unknown.

I watched them, as I drove forward toward where they blended into open sky; and for a long time I heard the singing behind me, as I drove to the spaceport and the ship for Earth that waited in the sunlight.

A Man of the Renaissance

by Wyman Guin (1915 - 1989)
Galaxy, December

Wyman Guin made an unforgettable science-fiction debut in 1951 with a searing, startlingly original novella called "Beyond Bedlam," and every few years thereafter would grace the pages of the s-f magazines with some remarkable short story or novelet that would attract intense attention for a time without ever establishing its author as the major writer that he was. Perhaps the fact that he published only one science-fiction novel had something to do with his relative obscurity. His only books were the slender paperback collection of seven stories, *Living Way Out,* which appeared in 1967, and the comic novel *The Standing Joy* (1969), both now virtually unobtainable. "A Man of the Renaissance" is altogether typical of Guin's work—bright and fresh, vivid and captivating.

I

Now that the revolution was a success the little Chacone and I were staying at the Stone Inn. As you might suspect from the name, there is not a piece of rock in the whole building. Nevertheless, it is the best address on my home island.

I sat at a window of my parlor and watched the street lamps gutter in oily smoke. The first gray of dawn pearled the mists between the lights. With day approaching, you could hear an occasional patter of feet on the worn plank streets. The voices of our guards came more frequently from far and near.

"Halt, for inspection!"

I felt a sigh heave my chest. The rebel leader and I had not commanded our forces very brilliantly. There had been much more killing than I had anticipated. The defenders of the false king, together with our own dead, had been piled in the streets, and in the courtyard of the Tower, and up all the stairs of the Tower. Every burial pool on the island had been crowded with mourners for two days now.

From where I sat listening to the first stirring of the frightened city, I could see the dim lights in the shabby Tower of my home island. Our kings have never lived higher than six levels above the sea. Even the poor little island of Torne has a higher Tower.

Tonight, all of the rooms of our Tower were lighted as a protection for the young prince whom we had taken from his prison and placed in the Tower the night before last. We had him under the protection of the First Overlord and those soldiers from the old army who had joined the revolution. The first overlord was now preparing the Tower for the ceremony at noon, today, in which the prince would be made king. Until that ceremony there was danger everywhere.

The people were happy about the death of the false king and about the placing of the young prince in the Tower. It was my own plans they were against. They wanted no part of my scheme to bind two other small, floating islands to our island and create one large, rich island. I had not lived on my home island since childhood and I was, to my rude people, a fancy foreigner with educated ideas.

Across the gray fog appeared the first ochre streams of day. Sha'tule, our yellow sun, would rise shortly. About an hour later his bluish twin, Sha'charn, would come up. Then the fog would melt.

There was a gentle knock at the door between our apartments and the little Chacone entered. She was dressed in mourning for the "rebel dead."

Her black sheath did little to obscure her figure, and it set off her beautiful face dramatically. She was wearing a royal funeral tiara of the black diamonds that are mined by divers in the shallow Sea of Mourning. This was her right, since the beautiful women of Chacone are made true queens before they leave the island. From wherever in the world their masters may live, they participate by messenger in the highest affairs of Chacone. After all, the whole island is supported by these rare women.

She hesitated at the door to make sure she was not intruding. "I heard you moving about over an hour ago."

"I am just waiting for noon. Nothing is safe until noon."

Up the street I thought I glimpsed a furtive scuffle.

She was approaching me and I raised a hand. "Did you hear a cry?"

She stopped, but she did not glance out into the fog. "I heard nothing."

"I thought I heard a cry."

Now she came directly to me. She took my hands and raised them until I followed with my body to stand over her.

She said, "Darling, you are depressed about the killing. You have killed because you had to. Now, in a few hours, your people will have a good king."

"I killed because I want to bind three poor little islands into one rich, big island."

I spoke with conscious melodrama. "The men who died will never share that wealth. The men who live do not want it."

I kissed her and went on, "To put things clearly, the so-called 'false' king is 'false' only because he is dead. He got that way because he refused to sign the treaty I want with the islands of Torne and Parsos.

"He was a better administrator than this prince will be. Don't forget, I taught this prince while he attended the University of Hahn. I can tell you, he is something of a lout. But he will sign the treaty as I wish it, and so, he is a 'true' king, in my estimation."

She put her golden arms about my shoulders and kissed my mouth. Since she had been trained from childhood in every nuance of love, and since she loved me deeply, it was a kind of kiss that would have made a common man throw sticks at his bride.

Her lips broke with a little laugh and she drew back. "Darling, I must be *seen* in my funeral finery. Won't you take me down to the dining room?"

Without offense she had interjected a little light-heartedness. Since arriving on my island a few weeks ago we had a joke about her.

In their natural habitat—the great cities on the rich islands of the world—the Chacone women display no vanity. For thousands of years the Chaconese have lived in ritual polyandry, breeding and perfecting these beautiful creatures for export. These women are so accomplished in manners and so talented in the arts that it usually does not occur to an ordinary woman to envy them. Still, there are always a few who do, and on many islands the native word for female vanity has been replaced by a phrase that means, "trying to act like a Chacone."

While we had lived on the rich island of Hahn, she had been simply the most beautiful Chacone anyone had even seen. Here on this naive little island where none of the last three kings had been able to afford a Chacone, she was the most beautiful *human* anyone had ever seen. The adulation had shocked her at first. Then she had begun to revel in it because, once my people accept a stranger, it is all the way to the heart.

So we had this joke—that she was a Chacone trying to act like a vain wife. With her little parody, she had made me face the fact that my "guilt" about the killing was as unnecessary as her "vanity."

For the first time since we had got the prince into the first overlord's protection and the fighting had ceased, I began to get a grip on my depression.

"My marvelous little Chacone!" I took her sweet face in my hands and kissed her again.

I debated about arming myself to go down to breakfast. Then I put on the Great Blade of Hahn and tucked my steel knife into my sash.

As I reached to open the door to the hallway, to let the Chacone pass through, there was a knock on it. I pressed her back and drew the knife and opened the door a crack. It was the big rebel leader.

We grasped forearms affectionately, and he bowed with respect to the Chacone.

As we went down the hall toward the stairs he fell into step beside me.

"There are things I do not like."

"For example?"

"The Tower is locked."

"The Tower is always locked on the day a king is made."

"Nevertheless, there are things I do not like. I am going to have a close look at everything."

Downstairs he bowed again to the Chacone. To me he said, "I will be back before Sha'charn rises."

He had succeeded in stirring some unease in me. When the Chacone and I entered the dining room, I let the attendant take my cloak and feathered hat, but I kept my Great Blade and my knife.

We were no more than seated at our table when I caught a flash of evidence that I was right to be alert. A man at a table against the wall made a mistake.

He was having flashed gull eggs for breakfast. Instead of driving his sipping tube through the shell of the egg he was holding, he punched a delicate hole in it with his thumb nail.

He froze, and I swept my eyes to the face of the Chacone before he could inspect the dining room. The islands held by sea bandits have never adopted the sipping tube which is proper everywhere else.

I smiled at the Chacone and then made a disinterested survey of the room. He was looking directly at me. He had picked me as the only guest who might have noticed that a spy from the sea bandits had just broken an egg.

On any island where there is political strife, and even on islands where these clever men can smell it coming, there are spies for the sea bandits. When these spies report that an island is sufficiently divided and weakened, the bandits come in for brief, bloody raids.

I decided that as long as this man was worried about the manner in which he ate his eggs, we were safe from such a raid. Now that we knew him, he could be watched and it would be time enough to worry if he disappeared.

"Waiter."

He came around the table from where he had been watching the boys put saucers of fruit before us and fill our glasses with spiced rainwater.

"Yes, Master?"

"What is that shouting out in the street?"

"Both of the local printers have sheets out this morning that tell of the revolution. Shall I send one of the children?"

"Please do."

He beckoned an urchin of less than six years from the corner of the room and sent him for the papers.

"Is that all before I serve your first course, Master?"

"No. Look me in the eye." This waiter had been very loyal to the revolution. He stood still and looked me in the eye.

"The man against that wall is a spy for the bandits."

"Ahhhh! Really?"

He was staring hard into my eyes trying to remember the guests in the direction I had glanced.

"Ahhhh! In the white blouse with lace?"

I had only to nod once.

"Really! I would never have guessed."

"Have him watched constantly."

"Of course."

"And waiter."

"Yes, Master?"

"Sha'tule is up. Many of the guests here who are trying to stare at my lady are looking directly into the panes of this window. Why don't we draw the curtain for their benefit."

A smile passed his lips. "How gracious of you, Master."

She gasped, "Oh!" and with a little laugh, she popped a berry into her mouth.

Just before the waiter drew the curtains, I saw dark shadows of soldiers race along the translucent panes on some emergency.

I grinned at her. "I must say, you are being *seen*."

She dropped her delighted eyes in embarrassment. "Darling, please! It was only a silly joke."

The child returned with both papers. I looked into the pale, pinched face that you see so often in these children of my home island, and I overtipped him lavishly.

He hardly understood what I had given him. Instead of returning to his post in the corner of the room, he raced from the inn for home and mother.

The Chacone was shaking her head. "You shouldn't do that, darling. He may be accused of stealing."

I shook my head in turn. "I don't know why I do it to the little beggars."

Neither of us mentioned that I had a son of that age whom I had never seen. She simply reached out and covered the back of my hand with hers and asked, "May I have a paper, dear?"

One of the printers was still using wooden type, but the other had acquired the metal type that is now molded on the island of Hahn. I gave her the one printed with metal.

We had been served hot bitter-berry tea, and we both sipped while we read. Abruptly, she started exclaiming in whispers,

"Darling, it tells all about you here. It says that you are not *just* a Master of The Seven Arts, but the most learned and talented man in the world. It says that your books and scrolls are treasured by seven kings and countless lords. It says that your paintings in oil and your sculptures and your designs for the great Towers of the world are..."

"Does it say anything about my flying machine?"

She glanced up and down the page. "No, I don't see anything about that."

"I didn't think you would. But if we had lost the revolution you would be reading a feature story about it."

"*Did* you have a flying machine?"

"No, I had a machine that didn't fly."

My paper, printed from the larger wooden type, was quite thick and I began hunting with excited annoyance for some mention of my great plan to bind together my home isle and the islands of Torne and Parsos. I could find no mention of it.

"Oh, darling, it tells about *me! Listen!* 'For his work in developing the steel of the Great Blade of Hahn, the Master was given a beauteous Chacone by the king of Hahn. It is said that the king paid for her the highest price ever paid to the Chaconese.'

"Oh, darling, listen to this! 'Our whole citizenry has been grateful these past weeks for her gracious—' "

"My dear. Calm yourself!"

"—'for her gracious presence...her wit...her taste and artistry...her...!' "

She was becoming quite breathless. I couldn't help laughing. Her breathing stopped and she turned to me with the glazed stare of a completely ravished woman. "What was funny, darling?"

"I'll tell you what let's do. Give me that paper, now. Then, after breakfast, we'll go upstairs and snuggle into bed and read to each other about ourselves. Won't that be fun?"

She handed me the paper obediently. "Don't be silly."

While she sat in her daze, automatically rebathing in adulation, I searched the metal print for any mention of my plan to bind together the three little islands.

There was nothing.

Slowly, I lowered the paper to the table. It was an ominous sign. They were dead against it. In the moment of our triumph they did not dare mention it. But when the time came they would try to swing the popular dislike of my plan to influence the new king against it.

I heard my teeth gritting together and I found that I was trembling with anticipatory rage. I had not led hundreds to their deaths, killing other hundreds, only to let two smudge-fingered printers stand in my way.

I saw that the spy for the sea bandits was leaving. Then he hesitated, staring at the doorway.

II

The rebel leader was standing in the entrance. There was an air of urgency about him. The spy would have given anything if he had not already risen and headed for the entrance, but it was too late now, and he passed on out with only a glance at the rebel.

When the big man reached our table, I saw what the spy had seen. The blunt face was chalked with shock, the pupils dilated, the breathing shallow and fast.

I could feel the blood draining from my own face. My whole body was straining; first to swell into a giant of rage, then to shrivel to a beetle and scuttle for the wall.

He sat down, whispering hoarsely, “It is all lost. We have been tricked. The first overlord has locked the prince in the Tower dungeon. He commands the remnants of the old army against us. They have just taken the warehouse we were using as a garrison and killed over a hundred men.”

I started to rise.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me down. “Listen to me. We are safe as long as we don’t leave the hotel. Even if I’m captured I do not think the first overlord will have me killed. It is you and your plan he wants to stop. We must get you off the island.”

He continued with heavy breathing, “Now, listen. The bamboo forests are still in fog. I am preparing a guarded way for us through the alleys to the edge of the city. I am also preparing a fast ship for you and your lady. If we are cut off from that, I am having a raft prepared for you.”

I stared at him. “Rebel, we are surrounded by desert seas right now. I can’t take a raft into those deserts.”

"Master, I believe you can do anything. I only say that you cannot always do everything at once. If we are reduced to the raft, your lady will have to remain."

The little Chacone was clutching and unclutching my hand in hers. I became aware that the dining room had become electrified with terror and was emptying. We three had become a focal point where the sudden threat of death hummed in the ears of those present like a stricken wasp.

The waiter hurried up to us. "Master, I have heard about the treachery. But listen, there is more. The spy for the bandits has disappeared. In days, the sea about here will be swarming with them. If you were thinking of escaping with your lady… I beg you, don't."

She was shaking her head piteously with tears glistening on her cheeks. "Please don't leave me. I do not fear any of these things. Please take me with you."

The rebel and I were staring at each other across the horrible thought of capture by sea bandits. I turned dazedly to the Chacone and shook my head.

She buried her face and wept.

The waiter declared, "Master, no harm will come to her. We will take good care of her." Then he excused himself and hurried away.

The rebel rose. "I will make one last check of the escape route while you say farewell to your lady." He left the dining room by way of the kitchens.

I stood up, and drew the Chacone up to me. Her lips moved warmly and her tears were hot on my face. Undoubtedly, for the last time, I was holding the world's most fabulous prize in my arms. Yet death, buzzing insistently in my ears, reminded me that I had been condemned, long ago, to love another.

The woman I loved was beautiful, but not this beautiful; talented, but not this talented; royal, but not this regal. She was the mother of my son, and perhaps I was condemned to love her simply because I could not have her.

I kissed the dear little Chacone over and over and promised her that I would return. Then I found that I was promising to return with soldiers and retake the Tower.

So there it was in the open…the killing had not yet been enough. It had only been in vain. Whether or not the sea bandits came I would come again, to kill again for my plan to bind together the three islands.

The rebel and I had no difficulty reaching the edge of the city. We were beckoned from point to point by our waiting comrades. Trouble began immediately when we entered the forests of bamboo.

A rebel came racing toward us from ochre banners of fog. "They have captured the boat and the three men guarding it. Take this side path to the raft. Hurry, they are right behind me."

He gestured wildly and fell at our feet with a javelin in his back. We raced into the forest, where the light of Sha'tule beat at the fog with a golden hammer.

Shrieks and moans from a thousand lost souls burst from the path ahead of us. I stopped dead in the path and the big rebel crashed into me.

We both simultaneously recognized the din as the pipes and strings of funeral music. The scale in which my people play their harsh instruments is fortunately unknown on other islands.

The rebel leader was pressing me forward. "Move in and mingle with the mourners. They will be hurrying the funeral to avoid the Sun Gods. They will not notice."

Masked by the racket and concentration of the ceremony, we went in among the mourners who encircled the pool. Smoking torches still fluttered along the edge of the golden bowl of light above the pool…light that was now fretted with the blue of Sha'charn. A red-shrouded corpse was poised over the water on his bamboo slide. The burial stone to which his feet were bound was a rich one, fully a hand thick, and as big around as a man could encircle with his arms.

The wailing of the instruments ceased, and now the big rebel, his rock-like face unmoved, worked to still his deep breathing.

On all sides, presently, I could hear the soldiers moving quietly. They inspected the mourners from a pious distance and they passed right by us.

The Shaman mounted his stand at the head of the reclining corpse. After a long time in which little accidental sounds ceased, he started reading from his sacred scroll.

"All things that live on land, all the animals of the islands and the cities of men on the islands, float at the surface of the sea where there is storm and sinking and terror."

Suddenly the widow, who stood with her friends beside the Shaman's place, lifted her arms to the thinning fog and shrieked a curse. With a bound of my heart, I recognized that it was me at whom she hurled this hatred. The rebel turned to me, and he could not help grinning.

There was a little commotion near the widow and the rudely grinning rebel used the moment to whisper, "Master, they are praising you."

Now it made my throat ache to see this corpse. He had been Captain of the Guard at the Tower, and last to stand before the door to the apartments of the false king. I had to run the brave man through.

The Shaman went on with his reading. "On the currents of the worldwide sea, our islands drift to the north and they drift to the south. They bring us to the depredations of the Ice Islanders. Our islands drift into the boiling waters of steam and pumicine and into the chill waters of ice and snow.

"All these terrors are controlled by the evil eyes of the stars which control all things at the surface of the sea."

This belief is the reason funerals are held at dawn or sunset. They want the dead to go to the sea floor without being seen by the evil stars or wrathful Sun Gods.

The Shaman continued, "But the eyes of the stars do not reach to the Floor of the Sea. Down there, where decay cannot occur, far from the storm and terror of living, there go all the dead…"

Behind me a soldier coughed nervously, and from the other side of the pool, another also coughed. The rebel smiled sympathetically.

The Shaman had reached that part of sacred belief that is most distressing to a man of action, and presently I could hear the soldiers begin moving away. In the thinking of the pious, the Floor of the Sea is a great, calm plain on which, in static promenade, the buried dead stand about in the blue shrouds of women and the red shrouds of men, their feet bound to their burial stones, contemplating for eternity the aqueous silence.

Unable to bear such a prospect, the sailor has invented the lascivious seawomen, and the soldier has named our twin suns Sha'tule and Sha'charn…"commander of the dead that arise as mists," and "commander of the dead that arise as storms."

The drums about the burial pool began to murmur and the slide bearing the corpse was slowly tilted. I thought the brave captain would never let go of his slide. Then, as the drums reached a deafening roar, it was as though he remembered some gleeful prospect, so abruptly did he shoot into the black water.

My throat ached, but I found there were no words to say to him.

To make sure we would lose the soldiers, the rebel and I returned toward the city for a way with the mourners. We left them where a narrow path headed back toward the island's edge. We raced down this, still protected from any distant view by the thinning fog. The ground grew softer and now only a few feet beneath us, was the sucking of the sea.

The rebel motioned to me and stopped. He studied things through the fog a bit and then whispered, "They are guarding the paths ahead. If we don't slip through them, run for the amphibial."

I whispered back, "Listen, if we are separated, tell our people I have gone to Thule for soldiers."

He stared at me in disbelief. "I thought the king of Thule had condemned you to the plank?"

"He will have forgiven me."

He continued to stare at me and shook his head. "Master, you have lost your mind to go back there."

Behind me a man shouted very loudly, "Aaaaeeee, here!"

III

He was hurling a bone-pointed javelin and it was sad for him that he missed my face. I drew the gleaming Blade of Hahn, the blade a stride long, a length unheard of in most of the world. I took two steps and ran him through.

The rebel was calling to me, "This way."

Soldiers rose out of the shallow ground, eager and yelling. I heard all about us as we ran, that dry whisper of death—arrows clipping through the bashai leaves. We plunged into the rank growth of the amphibial where the thin ground waved under foot, where the thicket crawled with deadly snakes and toads.

While an island drifts through tropic waters it is bordered with this pumicine pack and its wildly growing plant life. No man would willingly venture there and the soldiers did not follow. They stood on the higher ground and waited.

When we started to move we waved the head-high, pulpy bush. A shower of arrows snickered through the leaves. There was laughter from the shore. They had themselves a real sport. If they didn't hit us, the snakes would.

I went ahead of the rebel with my Great Blade and in thirty stops I cut six filthy snakes. The soldiers showered arrows increasingly wide of us as the stir we caused drew out of their sight. Finally, we were free of the soldiers and there was only the great, hot hush of the amphibial about us.

The island had not passed through a storm in many months and so the amphibial was unusually solid. Even so, we stepped through the treacherously waving earth frequently, and once the rebel went clear through till I grabbed the bushy hair of his head.

Sha'tule and Sha'charn were high now and boiled down into the thicket. Clouds of insects made our progress torment.

What a curse it is that this great military barrier around every island fails us when we need it most. As our islands drift north or south toward the Ice Islanders, the encircling amphibial shrivels. Creeping roots that have collected these great pumicine packs and rotting leaves in the long tropic heat now freeze. The snakes and poisonous toads retreat to the more solid land and burrow. The chill waves smash away all but a little rim of the once forbidding amphibial, and when the Ice Islanders come in their fearsome, horned boats we must defend every pace of the frozen shore.

The rebel leader, an older man than I, floundered more and more frequently. One man cannot carry another, or any great burden, without breaking through such thin ground. We were desperate by the time we came upon a small boating channel.

The fishers maintain these channels with walls and bottom woven of bamboo. As an island heads for the tropics and an amphibial grows about it, the fishers add these cradles of bamboo, making a channel to the sea for their craft.

We crawled onto the overhead cross members separating the bamboo walls of this channel. We lay in the hot sunlight unable to care what might happen.

At last I asked him, "Is the raft in this channel?"

He nodded without speaking to me.

It was mid-morning before we let ourselves down into the sea water and swam silently back to the land.

Two soldiers with bone-pointed javelins stood on the floating wharf watching the shore and whispering to each other. A raft had been upended on the wharf for repairs and the two stood with this between themselves and the shore. Not once as we approached did they worry about the surrounding amphibial.

I drew the rebel to me and whispered to him while our toes rested on the bamboo cross members at the bottom of the channel. With our heads barely above water we moved cautiously ahead.

When we reached the end of the wharf they were about ten paces away. I nodded to the rebel and he sank from sight.

I counted methodically to 20. I drew my steel knife and threw it, a flash of light, between the ribs of the man on the left. His companion turned in astonishment. I grimaced and hissed a curse. He raised his javelin as, behind him, the rebel mounted the wharf.

I ducked and the javelin boiled into the water over my shoulders. I raised my head to see him kneeling with coy surprise before he rolled into the water. I mounted the wharf and retrieved my knife. We hurried to a fishing raft that was somewhat larger and more substantial than the others.

The rebel loosened the moorings. "You will have to do with what provisions are here," he whispered.

I turned to him in stunned disbelief. "Isn't it stocked? Are you trying to kill me? I have to cross a desert sea."

"Something has gone wrong. This isn't the raft we had prepared."

I opened the floor box of the raft and glimpsed gaffing rods and a coil of rope. I cast about the wharf frantically until I saw one of those huge baskets which fishermen sometimes tow behind them filled with live fish. I brought this and threw it onto the deck while the rebel was shoving past the end of the floating wharf. I leaped two paces to the deck and he handed me a paddle.

"I will help you paddle out to sea. If soldiers appear before we are out of sight I can duck back into the amphibial until dark."

Standing on opposite sides of the raft we paddled it back out the channel to the bobbing beds of free pumicine. I moored to the last bamboo stays of the channel and we rested.

He was a big man with a determined face and a blunt way. "I am not sure you will return. Your cause is not our cause."

"My cause includes your cause. We both want the young prince made king. Once he is king I will be able to take my business to him."

"You are sure he will sign the treaties you want with the islands of Torne and Parsos?"

"I know him. After all, I was his teacher when he was a boy. I taught him the first two of the Seven Arts."

"You think the Kings of Torne and Parsos will sign?"

"They have already signed a proposal."

"What do *they* gain by this?"

I began to unroll the split bamboo sail. Since the wind was from the land the raft pulled at its mooring.

It made me angry to talk with him about this. Why could not the people of my homeland see that they would have no lasting prosperity until they federated with other freely floating islands?

The Kings of Torne and Parsos were both convinced that my plan was feasible to bind together with great ropes these small islands so that eventually they would grow together in the tropic lushness. When next their lands drifted out of the north seas clean of amphibial, they planned to erect the great sails I had designed. They would try to maneuver their islands together and bind them. With three islands thus bound there would be so much less shore to defend and so many more to defend it the next time we drifted against the Ice Islanders. Such a man-joined island, ruled by these three peaceful Kings, would be as wealthy and powerful as the great rock-latched islands of Thule and Hahn.

But the people of my homeland are stubborn and arrogant. The former king, who had obtained the Tower falsely, would never listen to me. So I had joined these rebels to place the young prince to whom I could talk in the Tower. One could not talk to these stubborn rebels about joining peaceful hands with a sister island. They were as independent as sea-going turtles.

This one shook his head profoundly. "You worry too much about the Ice Islanders. I wouldn't sleep on the same island with a Tornian. They are root grubbers."

I had the sail fully hoisted and the raft jerked at its mooring. He did not take the hint, so I went back and squatted near the rope to untie it.

I turned and snapped, "You, rebel, have not been taken from your home as a boy by the Ice Islanders. You have not spent two years as their slave. You are a small-island man and you think like a small..."

Suddenly, I saw on the sea over his shoulder, what had happened to the raft that had been prepared for me. Four soldiers paddled it swiftly, silently toward us.

The rebel, as if answering my insult with an impudent gesture, thrust at me from his mouth the barbed head of an arrow.

I spun backward, drawing the Great Blade. I slashed the mooring, and the raft leaped into the pumicine beds. As a second arrow sang over the deck, I tore open the lid to the deck box and dived into this narrow confine, jabbing myself painfully on a gaffing hook. Two more arrows thudded into the deck and then no more. I peeked out and saw that the soldiers were struggling to mount their sail.

They would draw more water, and I was sure they could not overtake me. Nevertheless, I spent little ceremony in disposing of the dead rebel and assisting my flight by paddle. Soon they gave up the chase and headed back for the channel. I stopped paddling and let the sail bounce me over the pumicine.

Across our seas drift great reaches of this stone, some as large as a man's thumb tip, and most much smaller. If one cuts a piece of this stone on a lapidary's wheel he will find it filled with air spaces. If one digs anywhere on an island he will find, beneath the soil of rotted vegetation, a thick ground of pumicine tightly matted in wiry roots. On an old rock-latched island such as Thule, this base may be ten times as deep as a man stands.

IV

It is the belief of the pious that the islands were born in antiquity to fabled Sea Goddesses who sometimes cohabited with the Sun Gods. Thus, it is said that the beautiful isle of Ohme, which never leaves its narrowly circling current in the tropics, was begat by Sha'tule, commander of the mist. It is said that the Sea Goddess, Tora, in gratitude for this delightful gift, swore to retain the isle in her womb until it was the most beautiful in the world. She is said to have travailed for a thousand years to create Ohme, where the tiny red deer bound across emerald meadows and the balloon flowers loose themselves from their branches at night and copulate above the tree tops with little cries.

A man who notices what he sees instead of what he hears will not believe that Ohme, or any other island, was born in such a way.

In my lifetime our knowledge of the world has grown tremendously, and we are not so likely to believe that Sea Goddesses actually exist as we are to treasure them as myth.

I think this: the islands are being built each day. There are forces building them and forces tearing them apart. In many parts of the ocean, such as Chryo where stupendous rocks reach to the clouds, there are great boiling places out of which gouts of pumicine are coughed up from the water. In addition there are many places in the sea where cones of hot rock and fire rise high in the sky and two of these are near the rock-latched island of Hahn. From all these places comes stone filled with air spaces.

Where beds of such pumicine float in calm seas you find them strewn with plantlife, and if the time is long enough you can pick up clumps of floating stone tightly bound in wiry roots and already plastered on the underside with the bulbous red leaves of the bottom plant. Such a clump is a primitive little island which is being borne only figuratively in the womb of a Sea Goddess. For the bottom plants suck up water and strain it of salt and deliver fresh water to the plants above. These in their turn are spread in the sunlight, which plants must have, and somehow they exchange sunlight with the bottom plants that were always in the sea.

I think that shallow islands such as Chacone, where the soil is brackish and unfit for agriculture, will one day be deep islands like Thule. After a storm on any island, you find pumicine in the funeral pools, which means it has been driven in under the island where it may be incorporated by the muscular bottom plants into a deeper ground.

At last I was free of the pumicine beds of my home isle. Now, about me, the green sea swelled like white-nippled breasts of the necrophilic seawomen. The raft slapped from wave to wave with a busy illusion of progress. I stepped forward of the sail and watched the horizon where a blue line lay. I decided that I had about two hours before I would be leaving the green sea.

I lashed the basket in the water at the rear of the raft, and used one of the gaffing hooks to land my food before I reached the desert. I was able to bring in six large blue-stripes without harming them unduly and I dropped them into the basket. A seventh, I left on the deck for tonight's food.

I reached the endless blue of the desert. There would be no fishing here. The sparse plankton supported no life. Now my progress fretted me. The improbability of success began to depress me. The first overlord would probably assume the kingship tomorrow. Now was the time to overthrow him while the people were bitter that the young prince had not been placed.

Now was the time, and here I sat slapping from wave to wave. Worst of all had been the death of the rebel leader. Now the rebels would have to rise spontaneously when and if I reappeared.

Prospects were even gloomier ahead of me on Thule. I was going there to beg soldiers from a man who had last looked upon me in fabulous rage and had cried out in anguish, "Give him one hundred lashes. Nail him to a plank and put him adrift at sea."

I had been saved from that punishment. I had escaped to Parsos, where the king had given me refuge against every threat and bribe from Thule. But I could not go to Parsos or Torne for help in this venture. If their soldiers came storming into my home isle killing lords and overlords—even putting the young prince in the Tower would not soothe the feelings of my people. After such a day there would never be a treaty such as I wanted.

The only source of soldiers close enough this year to be feasible was the rock-latched island of Thule, near which our present currents were carrying us. The source was a good one. I was simply the worst possible ambassador.

I had heard that the rage of the king toward me had cooled. Definitely he had not torn down the Great Tower of Thule, though at first he had threatened to do so.

How *could* he have done that? Of all my works, the Great Tower for the king of Thule is the crowning achievement. The huge platform on which it stands is built of hardwood raided from the Ice Islanders and is a hundred paces square. On the upper floors, I had directed a hundred lapidaries for two years to finish the mosaics of the outer walls. These are of ivory and pearl, wood and stone. They depict all the allegories of the Sea Deities and the highest levels depict the epics of the ancestors of the king of Thule.

The wood panels on the inner walls I had painted magically in oil so that the human form and all the animals and fishes of the world are seen in delightful poses and so real that the eye is bewitched.

This Tower rises fourteen levels over its massive columns, gleaming high above the lesser Towers of lords of Thule. Truly, the king of Thule is raised above the sea. How could he have brought himself to destroy such a work? And every day that he lived in those halls he looked upon the message of my hand. Surely he would have softened toward me.

That night I ate the raw fish and drank its water. I lay on my back watching the stars. I was steady on course. The Shamans say the stars are "evil eyes" that create all disaster. A man who thinks does not credit such talk. A man who sails (and whoever heard of a sailor Shaman?) knows the stars as friends.

There are many wonderful thoughts in the world today, new ideas that thrill you. One, that is most exciting to me, is the theory of the aged professor of astronomy at the University of Parsos. This theory is that the stars are really suns like Sha'tule and Sha'charn and that they are so small only because they are far from us. I like to think that there may be other worlds on which those suns shine.

I have tried to think of other worlds, for example, one where the sea would be almost dried up, perhaps by a closer sun. On such a world parts of the bottom of the sea might be exposed. Plants might grow on the exposed sea floor just as they do on pumicine. Animals would walk on solid rock. The Ice Islanders have great piles of rock which rise out of the ice and into the clouds and on which the hardwood grows. I mean…the whole world would be like that, and the islands would not move.

Tonight I tired of thinking of such different worlds and I wished that the little Chacone were with me.

When I awakened the suns lay hot on the horizon. I was startled. Hurriedly I checked the sea about me, and as a good seaman should, I looked into the suns.

It is a good thing that I did. I recognized her at once. Practically all the ships sailed by sea bandits are built to a pattern. This ship came at me like a great, black bat skimming between the suns, and I had only moments to prepare. My heart fluttered wildly into my constricted throat.

I would die, but I would not be tortured.

I jerked open the deck box of the raft and brought out the gaffing poles. The advice of an old merchant seaman raced in my mind.

"I've boarded three of 'em and there's only one way to do it. They always approach you on their windward because that's high-boarding for them."

I wanted them to board me forward of my sail. Aft of the sail, I rammed the butts of the gaffing poles through the bamboo and braced them in the logs. Their vicious points were a formidable barrier to boarding there. I snatched the coil of rope out of the deck box and formed a noose as they bore down on me.

I counted nine men leaning over the rail and one at the rudder. Three of the men, hesitating before the ugly gaffing poles about me, leaped onto my forward deck.

I gave thanks to the rich ladies of Hahn. They are lavishly untrue to their husbands, and a student at that university is not worth his salt unless he can throw a noose to the second floor of a rich man's Tower. The bandit ship swept past, and I caught the rudder pommel neatly.

Desperation hoisted me to the railing, and one motion that drew and swung the Great Blade slashed the throat of the surprised helmsman.

The bandits came at me to take a live prize, but when I opened the chest of a man from arm to arm they changed plan. The great Blade of Hahn is still as rare in the world as a king's Tower and greatly feared by fighting men. These five bandits now saw what I carried and they hurled club and javelin to kill. A javelin laid bare one of my ribs and a club momentarily stunned me and I fell heavily to my knees.

The voice of the old merchant man came back commandingly. "Board at the rudder and fight your way to the rear hatch." I followed the voice in a gleaming frenzy of the Great Blade. They would flay me a little at a time and salt my body if they took me.

I jumped down the stairs and slammed and bolted the door to the captain's cabin. Right behind me two of them hit it with terrifying fury. They would have it down in seconds, but if the old merchant man's advice held up they would be too late.

His voice lashed me to action. "Throw open the door to the forward compartment and jam it so you can see the forward hatch. Hurry back to the lee port in the captain's cabin and open it. Reach way up and you can cut loose the boom."

I watched through the door I had opened and when I saw light at the forward hatch I slashed the lashing of the boom with my knife. There was a sickening lurch through the ship and two men screamed. A leg that had started down the ladder in the forward hatch was whisked out again as if by the hand of a god. There followed two splashes in the sea.

The door to the captain's cabin was splintering, and I dashed forward. I went up the hatch-ladder, blade first, and chopped off one of two bare feet that suddenly appeared before me on the deck. His unbalanced blow with a club smashed into the hatch and enough of my head to knock northern lights through my brain.

As I climbed groggily onto the deck I heard the two who had smashed open the captain's door yell disappointment and clamber back up the rear hatch for the deck.

The fellow who had lost a foot did not realize it. He was trying to come at me with a knife. His head flew off with one swing of the Great Blade, and the two who had come up out of the rear hatch witnessed this. When I approached them they backed off respectfully. One of them dropped a stone ax to the deck. Presently he turned and dove into the sea.

The other man held a bone javelin hesitantly. I gestured over the side of the ship. He shook his head. I took a step toward him and he hurled the javelin. I chopped it out of the air. I raised the point of the Great Blade and I started backing him. When he reached the rail he just leaned away from the point until he fell overboard.

Then I understood why he had not done as had his companion. He could not swim. I had to listen to his screams while I brought the sail down to re-trim the ship.

The three men who had boarded my raft had made some progress. The man who had jumped overboard and one of the men who had been knocked overboard by the boom were swimming for the raft.

The raft was still a hundred paces away when I began re-hoisting the sail and felt the trim little bandit ship tighten like an airborne bird. I set my course for Thule.

By the time the raft was out of sight I had got rid of the bodies and swabbed the deck clean. Then I sat down near the tiller and carefully cleaned and polished my Great Blade.

What a marvel this metal was! Recently the Hahnese have been working the gray iron that flows from a fiery cone near their rock-latched island. Now I had learned to work it with charcoal to make blades such as these.

It had been for this the King of Hahn had given me the Chacone.

Unlike the killing in the revolution, I had no remorse over the killing of the sea bandits. They are descendants of the Ice Islanders. For centuries their ancestors dominated our oceans; their raiding and slaughtering almost wiped civilization off of most islands. Those dark centuries were ended only by the rise of the great navies of Thule and Hahn, which have pushed the bandits back to a few poor islands from which they operate.

I was thinking these things as I finished cleaning the blade, and I remembered that I had seen some writing on the table in the captain's cabin.

It is a seeming paradox that the bandits so love slaughter and torture that the most brutal man of another island shudders at the thought of them—and yet they are said to be constant poets. The long sagas of their history are marvels of myth and they are said to leave a scene of slaughter with every man vying to compose the best verse about it.

This captain had indeed been composing in a labored hand when I was sighted. His cup of morning tea had crashed to the floor when I later cut the boom. But the piece of parchment and his writing brush were where he had left them.

“Up ecstatic towers we raced.
With bone lance and flesh,
Their women we pierced,
Till thousands of doves
Were cooing for death.”

I reflected over the savage faces of the morning and decided that the man whose chest I had opened had been the captain. I tucked his lines under my sash.

V

As you approach Thule you understand that it takes a man two days to walk across this largest of all islands. It lies across the horizon like an endless, green cloud. The rocks to which it is latched do not rise out of the soil. But the gleaming Tower of the King of Thule, which is my design, can be seen from the sea.

Thule is the great stationary point of trade. All islands which are in currents that pass near her have cycles of industry and trade based on that fact. The approach near Thule is always festival time. When the currents bring an island into these waters, the stores of its products are traded for the exotic products from many islands. Even the Ice Islanders of the north sometimes appear in fearsome armadas to stand off Thule and conduct sullen trade.

I had not had Thule on the horizon more than a short time when the sails of a fighting ship came out in my direction. At this latitude there is little growth of amphibial and they keep a close watch on the sea. My ship, obviously a sea bandit, brought this fighter out under taut sail.

The fighter came about. The faces of the soldiers were many and they inspected every inch of my deck. I lowered sail rapidly and waited.

From about fifty paces the captain called to me, "Who are you?"

I cupped my hands and called back, "I am a Master of the Seven Arts. I call on the King of Thule."

The captain ordered his sail down and we drifted together in silent waiting. The grim soldiers did not speak with each other. They watched my deck. The soldiers of Thule are the finest in the world and their discipline is a thing to behold. The ship captains are always Lords of Thule.

"I'm alone."

"How did you come by this ship?"

"I captured it."

"Alone?"

"If you retrace my course you will pick up five ugly sea bandits adrift on my raft. The other five I killed and I have brought their ship as a prize to the navy of Thule."

For the first time the soldiers looked at each other and there was laughter. I drew the Great Blade and flashed it between Sha' and Sha'. The laughter abruptly ceased. The Lords of Thule already carry such blades and these soldiers now believed me.

At five paces the captain ordered a line thrown to me, and I made it fast. I stepped to the deck of the fighter of Thule and prickles of fear were on my back. The captain studied my face, and he recognized me.

He exclaimed "Master!"

I saw the many implications of this meeting storm across his rugged face.

A soldier whispered, "I'll swear on the Sea Floor, it is the builder of the Tower."

All motion about me ceased and there was silence in which no man heard more loudly than I that anguished cry, *Give him one hundred lashes. Nail him to a plank, and put him adrift at sea.*

The captain could only stare at me. I had painted for one of the inner walls of his Tower a scene that had since become famous. It depicts the legend of Namora. Startled from her bed of pearls, the chaste goddess fights off the advances of Ti, the sea serpent. With this painting I had at last achieved such depiction of the human body that all who saw it stood in awe. None of the paintings I had done on Parsos or Hahn equaled it. This captain had been proud of his association with me.

I saw on his face that the lords of Thule would be dismayed at my return. In their eyes I had not done such a wrong. In the last great raid of the Ice Islanders my parents had been killed. All their servants, and I their son, had been taken as slaves. It was not, to the lords of Thule, a discredit to me that subsequently a false king had assumed the Tower of my home isle and had dissolved the lordship of my father.

If then, I was a lord by desert, it was no great crime to have loved the youngest of the six daughters of their king. Unpolitic behavior, no doubt. But to be nailed to a plank! The thought is abhorrent even beyond its reality because of the belief that such cursed planks drift into the desert seas and remain afloat.

The Lord Captain who now stared into my face knew that my sentence was irrational. If the king had had a son, if one of his older daughters had had a son, I would today be married into the king's family. For in that circumstance a son of pure Thulian blood would not have been required of the youngest princess, to be later King of Thule. In that circumstance my impropriety would have led, not to her ineligibility for royal marriage, but to our early marriage.

The captain took me aside. "Master, why have you brought this trial to me? I must take you to your death. Don't you wish to stand on the Sea Floor? Must you decay here at the surface?"

"You think he cannot forgive me?"

"He will go through with it because he commanded it. What in the name of Sha'charn has brought you here?"

"A false pretender holds the Tower of my home isle. I have come for soldiers to retake it."

"Why didn't you go to Parsos, which is drifting close to you now?"

The sails of the fighter had been re-hoisted and the light breeze heeled us away from the bandit ship, which was returned with soldiers to pick up the raft-load of its former crewmen.

I explained to the captain why I could not use soldiers from Parsos.

The people of my homeland have an outlandish reputation for unpredictable and romantic action. The Lords of Thule and Hahn, the great powers that forced back the Ice Islanders, sometimes look down their noses at our violent political history. They call us "teri che" which is to say, "wild ones."

This captain now hurt my heart, as if he had slapped my face. He shook his head with a grim smile and said, "Teri che." Then, staring into my face uncomprehending, he went on, "You will not live to retake your Tower, let alone to carry out a scheme for binding islands together. You are going to be a dead patriot."

Then, without meaning to, he hurt me even deeper. "Thule owes you better than a plank. I promise that after your death, I will raise an invasion and straighten out your politics at home. I will place your *great* prince in his Tower."

With his contemptuous tone about our prince, which we agreed on, he expressed his evaluation of my plan to bind the islands, which he understood no better than my own people.

Neither by the rude nor by the sophisticated was my plan understood.

VI

Later, when we marched along a country road toward the city, with soldiers ahead and to the rear of us, I found there was one thing that rude people everywhere understood of me.

The news of my capture had run ahead. Tillers came down the neat rows of their fields to stand beside the road. They snickered and nudged each other and sometimes one could hear a suggestion that I must have a finer "tower" even than the king. The analogy had the inspired hurtfulness of the rude, and the hurt lay in the heart of the proud old man to whom I was being taken.

Twice soldiers had to dash to the side of the road and knock heads with their javelin butts. I began to understand why the King of Thule could not forgive me.

The flesh of my back crawled, and I perspired more than the day called for. The captain sometimes looked at me, but he said no more.

After the long walk through the country came the city. First the two-level towers of the poor on their awkward stilts; then towers of more levels, and towers that reared gorgeous mosaics of ivory and wood and pearl, seven and nine levels into the blue and gold sunlight. These rich men were indeed raised resplendently above the monotony of the sea.

Here in these nacreous towers lived the charming people whose eyes I had dazzled with carvings and paintings, and whose minds I had thrilled with theories. Now they turned from me in grief. I felt at my back the northwind of fear.

Then came the great square of Thule, which is actually paved from one end to the other with stone. All of this stone was raided two centuries ago from the great piles in the northern Ice Islands, and it is said that in the years of those raids 1,000 Thulians died—and twice that many Ice Islanders.

Here in this great sunlit square they would nail me to the plank. As sharply and dryly as the breaking of small sticks would sound the stone mallet on the pegs. The sound of the mallet would spank along the decorated tower walls and die away, and they would lift the plank to carry it out to sea. The crowd in the square would melt away, fearful and brooding because another vengeful "shee-shoon," which is to say, condemned spirit, would be loose upon the sea.

So I would drift into deserts with the suns banging my eyes while my home isle drifted in poverty.

The work of my own hand was the final blow to my hopes. How awesome was this dwelling! At the far end of the square it soared fourteen levels into the sky. Its grounds were walled with stone to twice the height of a man. Inside there, in the spacious gardens, rose four more towers, and even these were nine levels high.

All this had been done to my design, and now I trembled before it.

They did not take me to him. Instead, he came to me. He came in the night to the jail. I saw with pain that he was now a old man, as if something had broken in him and loosed the tensions of his haughty bearing. He stood before me and studied my fear.

He stood that way while they drew my hands up to the low ceiling in a noose and bound my feet to a shackle in the floor. Then he spoke and I learned that the voice was still his.

He asked softly, "How could you have done this to me? To me, who loved you and rewarded you and gloried in your work? How could you have taken from me my last hope?"

I could say nothing. Then, in the tiny, windowless jail, his terrible pride shrieked, "How could you have made a laughing stock of me?"

He tore the lash from the great brute beside him, and he smashed it into my face. Repeating over and over, "How could you have made a laughing stock of me?" he lashed my face and chest and groin, and I tasted what was to come.

As a boy I was tortured by the Ice Islanders. I do not bear torture well. I moaned when his weak flailing warned me of what the big jailer could do. When he had exhausted himself, he sat down on the damp floor and beat feebly with his fists.

The jailer took up the lash. He grinned pleasantly to me and asked politely, "How would you like it, Master? Slow, or fast?"

"No," I shouted. "No, Highest One, don't let him do this!"

But the poor old man was deaf to everything except his own misery and shame.

When I was again conscious, and the lights had stopped bursting in my eyes, the jailer was seated on a bench, resting. The fat of his chest heaved, and he ran a stubby hand across it to wipe away his sweat.

The king had risen from the floor. His silks were dirty and disheveled. "How many have you given him?" he asked the jailer, hoarsely.

"Barely thirty, Highest One."

Through the swimming of the room, I saw the jailer rise and start toward me, and I screamed.

"Let him down. Be gentle with him."

I allowed myself to sink to the calm Sea Floor.

He had me taken to his own apartments, in the highest levels of the Tower. In silence, he came every day and washed my wounds and dressed them.

He came several times each day and repeated this care in silence so that I wept when I was alone for what I had done to him.

On the third day he spoke.

"The Lord Captain who took you has explained the reason you have come. It is good politics for the rock-latched islands like Thule and Hahn, to strengthen the freely floating islands. You may have the soldiers. Whatever you need." With that he rose to leave.

Then at the door he turned, the whisper of his robes as loud as the shouting of a thousand soldiers.

"Be very clear about this. I do not waste a soldier for the sake of teri che. I believe your plan to bind those three little islands into one rich, strong island will work. By aiding that plan, I do one more little thing to keep back the Ice Islanders and keep down the sea bandits. It strengthens Thule."

His gray eyes lingered momentarily as he turned and left me.

Again and again, while the captain and I worked on the plans for storming my home isle, the king's words stung me. *"I do not waste a soldier for the sake of teri che."*

Again and again, this stinging drove my mind to the pool in the gardens of the Tower of my homeland. It a hole into the sea for decorative purposes and salt-lilies are grown there. On many islands there is such a pool in the gardens of the Tower.

I have often thought, "Behind all the guards at the walls of the Tower, there is a way in."

When the captain and I had completed our plans and had decided to embark in another four days, suddenly it came to me. "A craft can be built to go under the island and come up in the pool."

Such a surprise would save many soldiers of Thule, and many of my teri che.

In one moment things fell into place from countless observations and sources. How had I built and caulked the plumbing in the Great Tower of Thule? How does a fish roll in the water? How strong is the thickest of the found lenses of the glass of Hahn?

For two days, hardly taking time to eat or sleep, I stayed in my apartment drawing plans for such a craft. Once I went to the winery in the country and inspected two of the great hogsheads for storage which are large enough for a man to stand in.

The two giant hogsheads could be spliced together with more than enough strength and more room inside than would be needed by two men. This would be too buoyant, and so stone would have to line the bottom of the craft until it was almost ready to sink. Now, there would have to be a way to take on weight for sinking and get rid of it for coming back to the surface. So I would have a barrel braced on the floor midship and a pipe with a cock in it that would let water into it so that the craft would sink.

From the iron that flows near their island, the Hahnese have contrived a pump which a man may work by a handle and force water up a height. I would have to arrange one of these pumps so that water could be forced from the barrel back into the sea, and thus we would come again to the surface.

I saw that when the craft sank I would go on sinking, however slowly, unless a means other than emptying the barrels were used to stop this motion. So I would have structures along the sides like the fins of a fish that would maintain a level of descent as long as the craft was moving forward.

It was in moving the craft forward that I had trouble. There are no winds under the sea, and to paddle my hogsheads seemed to me out of the question. A boat can be moved forward by thrashing the rudder in a crude duplication of the fish tail. But I saw that no rudder I might design would move us from the edge of my home isle to the pool in the gardens of the Tower before the two or three occupants of the hogsheads fell from exhaustion.

I had to ask the captain for a delay in the embarkation. Naturally he was willing to wait for any plan that would spare his men. So I went back to my apartment and the problem of propulsion.

The more I thought about the clumsy action of a rudder, the more exasperated I became. There was something in this action that escaped me.

It was evening again, and I was utterly exhausted. I took a bottle of spirits from the cabinet and poured a drink. I sipped it while I stared at all the drawings I had made for propelling mechanisms. I poured another, large drink and went to the windows.

I do not deny that in my goings and comings about the Tower, I had never ceased to watch for the princess. I had not seen her and I did not see her now as my eyes searched the lawns and courts between the towers. But I longed deeply to see her, and suddenly I was drunk and very tired.

I awakened in the night with a headache. I rolled over in the luxurious bed and buried my face, and abruptly, there was the idea for the propulsion.

The rudder need not move like the tail of a fish, it need not act like any living thing. It could be a spinning rudder of two blades tilted oppositely on their axis. This could be turned by a shaft extending into the craft. The shaft should have two cranks in it so that two men could turn at once.

Now, before noon, I finished all the drawings for my craft, and I sent a servant to the king. He invited me to lunch on his balcony, and there I showed him the drawings for this marvelous boat that would take men under the sea.

By the end of our lunch he had become as excited as I. Then suddenly, we were both saddened that the old days were gone when we had planned together like this.

He said simply, “Have the Lord Captain procure craftsmen and proceed at once to build it.”

I was dismissed. He shook his head to prevent me from speaking.

VII

We built the undersea craft on one of the navy wharfs. In barely seven days we were ready for a trial.

We let the boat into water. I had added a barrel to the top of the structure through which the occupants could enter and leave. In the front of this superstructure I had had them caulk a thick lens of the glass of Hahn so that I could look forward under water.

I had somehow miscalculated the buoyancy and we had to add some stone to the floor. Finally, when I and the soldier who would go with me were both aboard, little more than the superstructure remained above water.

The poor soldier was shaking with fright but determined to die for Thule. I climbed the rungs back up into the superstructure and told the Lord Captain to pole us away from the wharf.

A luxurious litter appeared and came toward us.

I knew at once that it was the king. He could not stay away from this trial. I waited, standing in a barrel in the sea. I hoped for some warning or some encouragement from him. He simply motioned the Lord Captain and soldiers to be at ease. Then he waved to me in silence and stood waiting.

We had placed one of the fighters of Thule at a good distance from shore. I took one last sighting on the fighter to make sure we were pointing toward it. Then, hurriedly, I closed and tightened the hatch in the top of the barrel and descended into the dark to hear the soldier's teeth chattering.

I said, "Soldier, are you standing by the crank?"

He gulped hard. "Yes, Master."

"Stay there. Start cranking when I tell you."

I fumbled in the dark and opened the cock of the barrel. Through the shallow, fast breathing of the soldier, I could hear water running into the barrel. Back at the window I caught a blurred glimpse of the fighter just before the sea lapped over the glass. Then I was looking at the cool, green of underwater and fishes turning past. My heart beat wildly. I let the light deepen a little and hurried back to close the cock, barking my shins on the gracings for the barrel.

"Now, soldier, start to crank!"

I joined my effort to his at my part of the shaft. I could hear his frightened breathing begin to even out with the labor over the cranks. I counted up to one hundred turns of the shaft while it became insufferably hot in the hogsheads.

"Keep cranking with all your might," I gasped and made my way up to the window.

The green light outside had deepened shockingly. For the first time I felt fear of the sea. I scrambled to the pump and worked it for fifteen back-breaking strokes. Then I turned the crank with the soldier for twenty-five turns, and I could restrain my anxiety no longer. I went to the window and wiped fog from the glass. The light was reassuringly brighter.

"Rest a while, soldier."

"What, Master?"

"Rest a while."

I kept wiping the fog from the window and watching the light brighten until I could see the swirling of the sea surface. Now we needed forward speed so the fins along the side would keep us from coming all the way to the surface.

"Let's start cranking again."

"Master, are we all right?"

"We're all right, soldier, as long as we crank."

I turned the crank another hundred times with the soldier and stumbled with exhaustion back to the window. The light was still all right. I looked hopefully ahead and to the sides, knowing we could not be near the fighter.

The soldier labored with great lung-bursting breaths. I told him to rest again, and I turned the crank alone for fifty times before I fell to the stones of the floor in a daze. The air was foul and hot and my lungs heaved desperately.

When I could speak, I commanded, "Turn the crank, soldier."

"Master, I'm dying."

"Soldier, turn the crank or you *will* die."

At first with infinite weariness and then with dogged energy, I could hear him start turning the crank. I dragged myself up to the window. Just as I wiped away the fog, I saw something off to the left. Then it was no longer there. I fell back into the hogsheads yelling at the soldier, "Crank, man! Crank!"

I banged my head and ripped skin from my shins getting to the screws that controlled the rudder. I turned the rudder the wrong way. Then I turned it rightly. I made myself count slowly to twenty. Then I straightened the rudder.

When I again wiped the fog from the window, there was the hull of the fighter floating magically in a green-yellow sky.

"Soldier, we're there. Just a little more turning. Turn, soldier."

He turned and I turned with him. Then, gasping as if in death, I clambered back to the window and cried out.

"Stop, man. Crank the other way."

For a moment I had thought we might pass under the fighter and rip off the superstructure, but we stopped short of her.

The soldier had collapsed. I thought I would never finish pumping the water out of the barrel. For a time, after I was able to open the hatch, I stood and gulped at the air like a dying fish. Then I lifted the soldier and held him while he breathed it.

I climbed out the hatch and stood on the forward hogshead with water occasionally lapping my feet. We had come around the fighter and placed her between ourselves and the shore. All on her deck were at the other side watching for us toward the island. We drifted to a gentle bump against the ship. I reached up and caught the rail and pulled myself slowly to the deck.

I stood there for a moment looking at their backs, and then I said loudly, "Captain, we are here."

The King of Thule is a complex man. When the fighter, towing the undersea craft, brought us back, he stood before me for a time and simply nodded his head. Then, no longer able to restrain himself, he threw his arms about me and his old hands clapped my shoulders.

Still holding me he called to all about, "It is a holiday. The island must celebrate. There will be dancing and free wine."

As I walked back to the city beside his litter, I was not able to join in his enthusiasm. For I had not anticipated the agonies of the underwater trip. I knew that the distance out to the fighter had been little more than a third of the shortest distance from the shore of my home isle to the pool in its Tower gardens.

Suddenly I remembered the burial pools where we could surface for good air and rest in the protection of a tabooed place. Then I became as gay as the king was, and when I saw the many lords and ladies he invited to his apartments in my honor and the lavish banquet he had served, I knew that I had completely won his forgiveness. Somehow, having dissolved his shame by punishing me, his pride had risen again in the achievement of the day.

It was only natural that a gnawing hope rose in me. I watched every entering guest. I longed more than anything else in the world to see the princess, and I knew that it was impossible. He could not bring her here.

VIII

Two days later the undersea craft was ready on the deck of a cargo carrier, and the soldiers and ships were ready for the expedition to take the Tower of my homeland. I planned to take two soldiers to turn the crank. This would free me to handle the controls during the dangerous passage under the island and to keep a careful eye on the beacons of daylight that would fall through the pools.

In the late afternoon, the king sent a servant for me. The man took me down smoothly in one of the lifts I had designed for the Tower. Then he led me out to one of the spacious gardens where the king was waiting for me.

"First I must show you something over here in the garden house."

He led me to a small service house where the gardeners kept their tools. With poorly hidden excitement he pushed me through the entrance and closed the door behind me.

I was in blackness. Then I saw, glowing before me, a garden hoe and a fork. There was also a board with glowing letters. "Master, you are not the only inventor."

What an old fox this king was. The door opened and he was standing there as proud as Sha'charn.

"You know the glowing fish from the currents of Ohme?"

I nodded, smiling at his pleasure.

"I keep some of those fish in the pool over there. The light you saw in there is the stuff from their glowing stripes. It will last over a day, and you will have no trouble finding the controls of your craft."

Sha'tule, in sunset, and Sha'charn, yet a little higher, were splashing colors across a fluffy sky. The towers of the city were iridescent with fires. The king spoke as if he suggested a stroll. He spoke softly, too softly, and he laid his hand affectionately on my arm.

"Would you go with me to have cakes and wine with the princess?"

The island rocked and I put out a hand.

I was dismayed at what was happening to me. I stammered, "No. Highest One. That would not be right. Do not stir this thing."

"I think so too, but I can deny her nothing. Also, I would give you an opportunity to ruin my last hope or to vindicate the faith I had in you."

This last, I did not really hear. I was too dazed. I walked the way he led me, and the island was rocked by a storm deep in the sea.

In a garden behind one of the lesser towers, we came to her. She sat at a table decorating a fabric. As we approached she dropped the needle and her hand trembled on the unfinished fabric.

I stared at her hand that was telling everything and then at her lovely face, and my chest ached. I bowed and it felt like I was being moved by strings. The king asked me to be seated and I stood unmindfully until he repeated his request. Then, after I was seated, I found that I was unable to speak.

She did speak, but her words meant nothing because her voice fluttered like a bird in a snare. "You have been traveling many years, Master."

"Pardon me, Princess?"

"I say…I say, you have been away…a long time."

"Yes, I have been to many islands, Princess."

It seemed, after six years, that this was going to be all we had to say.

The king cleared his throat, and I was grateful for the compassion in his voice. "The Master has come for soldiers to retake the Tower of his homeland from a false pretender."

A nurse appeared at the nearby door, and I saw that she had with her the boy.

A thrill gripped me. This was my son.

The nurse saw us and grasped frantically to return the lad to the rooms. He fled her like a deer, bounding over the pretty flowers, and threw himself into his mother's arms. She drew his head to her breast and kissed his forehead and admonished him.

The nurse hurried forward to retrieve him, but the king waved her away. "Meet the child and me in a little while at the entrance to the Great Tower. I will go for a walk in the gardens with him."

Momentarily, I raised my eyes from the child to his mother's face, and found her staring at me with a great pride and warmth. Now, suddenly, we had so much to say to each other that we needed only our eyes to speak with.

The king rose and extended his hand to the child. "Come, my son, I will show you the luminous fish."

I stared at the boy and could not take my eyes from him. He was as favored as I had heard. He had his mother's famous looks. But I saw, too, the shock of hair that is my people's and the thin line of a mouth that is mine.

The king took the child's hand and repeated, "Come, my son." His message was not lost on me. For this *was* his son, the only heir he would ever have to the Tower of Thule.

When we were alone, I went and sat beside her. The light of Sha'charn was soft on her lovely head. I saw that she was now a woman, even as I was no longer a young man. I had forgotten the thick beat of my heart.

It was as though the years since our parting had stood for nothing. I felt my ambitions for my homeland melting away like a mist. What did I care to bind together three ridiculous little islands?

She assured me, between our kisses, that her father would make her Provincial Queen of the island of Lani and allow me to marry her as consort ruler if I but asked it. In that beguiling twilight we both understood that this long separation would only deepen the delight of Lani. Our touch still had the magic of our first touch.

When I had, one last time, kissed her eyelids, her cheeks and her mouth, I left her and went to ask him for this simple happiness.

From behind a low cloud Sha'charn hurled a vast shaft of fire at the Great Tower of Thule. I was momentarily dazzled. I looked up the cascading mosaics of fire to where an old man waited in the pinnacle of flame.

Then I awakened and knew that Lani would never be.

When I was admitted to his apartments, he stood at a window looking out over the wealth of his city. He did not turn.

I waited in silence and presently he spoke. "Do not ask of me what she wishes. If you ask it I will allow it. I suffer with both of you. But do not ask it of me."

Her face, in its last look of love, appeared before me and sharpened painfully till it blotted out the harsh reality of the room.

I heard his voice repeat, "Do not ask it of me."

I felt the huge wave of emotion on which she and I had risen begin to wash from me. Helplessly I stood there and felt it all wash from me until I was left empty as a cadaver that had somehow struck a pose of adoration.

Then her face was gone and I was back in the bitter reality of the king's room. From far below, the noisy happiness of the evening streets was a murmur of irony in this high place where the last light of Sha'charn lay across the rich carpet as might a fading, blue shroud.

He turned to me and gestured as if he deprecated that of which he spoke. "It is not a law, but an expectation, that the King of Thule will be Thulian. The people often prefer to see laws broken, but they do not easily tolerate the disappointment of an expectation.

"I have not much longer to live. If I declare the princess to be Queen and Interim Ruler, the people will in time forget you and there will be no more than ill-mannered heckling when, eventually, the prince assumes the Tower. But if you marry her, if you remain about as a constant reminder..."

He spread his hands as a conclusion.

He turned again to the dying light from the window, and I knew that he saw a marvelous vista that I had planned. "I have built Thule into the greatest power on the sea. I want my son to rule what I have built."

I went down to the streets. I was numb with loss, and I understood that, all these years, I had existed on the hope that eventually he would let us live together. Now I found that I was going to have to live with the bleak certainty that I would never again hold her. At the thought, my mouth grew dry and my palms perspired.

I walked to the Tower of the Lord Captain. While I awaited him, I looked for the last time upon my painting of Namora.

The captain came from his dining and looked at me questioningly.

"We leave tonight, Captain. It is the wish of the king."

We sailed with nine fighters. On the morning of the second day out, before Sha'tule had raised the first mists from the bobbing pumicine beds of my home isle, we lowered the underwater craft into the sea on a boom.

I remember the eerie light in the craft that came from the luminous stuff of the fishes, and I remember the soldiers cranking desperately in the stagnant air. I can still see the great balls of light from the burial pools where we surfaced and lay out on the hogsheads, gasping like monstrous fish.

Most clearly, I remember her face weeping in the dark of the sea.

I remember the garden pool of the Tower from which I stared across the alabaster lilies and heard only her voice murmuring of Lani. The great sound of the soldiers of Thule storming through the streets of my homeland did not still her murmur, nor did the screams of the guards at the gates as we three came from behind and cut them down.

I suppose a quiet sea will always speak to me of Lani. In any case, I can recapture her face only as it drifts in the dark nether world.

There was a strange thing down there…little fish with rods straight up from their heads on which hung bell-like lanterns, brightly lighted. They came to the window and inspected me. Now they always invade her memory, like little clowns relieving tragedy.

IX

I had the prince made king that very noon. I was taking no more chances with the lords of my home island…and it is true, as has been claimed, that when we brought him from the prison to his Tower, he stumbled over corpses. He *would* have to do *that!*…not once, but twice.

The officers of Thule laughed. It really looked like we were placing a dolt in the Tower to rule the teri che.

I gave him time to bathe and dine after the rudely rushed ceremony. Then I had myself brought to him in his shoddy, administrative rooms. As the captain of a mercenary force asks his price for services rendered, I put before our new king the treaty which had already been signed by the Kings of Parsos and of Torne.

He hesitated fretfully. He asked many questions.

I had expected him, in gratitude to me, and out of respect for the two great men who had already signed the document, to grab a pen with haste.

Instead the lout kept bringing up other matters of inconsequence. He interrupted my argument with asides to his new First Overlord.

This First Overlord was simply one of yesterday's rebels and behaved accordingly. His idea of polish was servility. Suddenly he glanced at me in fright.

Then, like a great bell, I re-heard what this profound king had just asked yesterday's rebel.

He had asked, "Where is the Chacone they sent to me with food while I was in prison?"

He had asked this as though it had just now occurred to him.

Slowly I lowered the map which showed how Torne and Parsos could be most efficiently bound to our island.

The First Overlord was agitated. "She is here, Highest One. You asked that..."

"Never mind what I asked. Bring her."

Then he said to me apologetically, "Ah, Master, forgive these interruptions. So many things have come up. I know it is not important to you, but I have fallen in love. Desperately! It happens she is a Chacone, and I must determine to whom she belongs so that I may pay the man a fair price. My mind will be much more receptive to your theories when I have settled this affair of the heart."

I was suddenly suffering a very bad chill and I shivered. He took the map from my hands and looked at it rather gaily and with new interest.

"Master, this is truly a moment in our history. To think that my signature will set this great plan in motion. You will be the hero of our people once they realize the greater prosperity and safety that will be theirs...."

The cringing First Overlord returned, and with him entered my little Chacone.

Like the broken barking of a northwind I tore at him. "Why you impudent little...you ungrateful...what do you know of love?"

He reddened and yammered. "You can't talk like that to me! I'm king now, not your pupil! Do you want to stand on a stone? What's this woman to you, anyway?"

"You know very well what she is to me. Do you think I'll bargain with you? No! I'll take her to Parsos and let you drift to Chryo."

He stormed out of the room. "You're under detention. Don't forget it. You're under detention." And then at the door, melodramatically, "Oh, that you should have blundered with her loveliness before I found her!"

I could have choked him through a thousand deaths. I went to the wall and beat my fist.

The little Chacone wept openly. She came and took my bruised hand and kissed it. She sobbed, "Oh, Master, my heart will break. I have known, Master. The way he looked at me from the jail, I knew this would happen. But my heart will break."

I caught the finality in her statement, and I took her shoulders and stared into her face. "What makes you think I would give you up?"

"You will have to. I heard them talking." She sobbed and indicated the First Overlord, who still stood at the door. "You will not get the plan for the islands unless you do."

She knew me better than I knew myself. She knew I would go back to the table and stare at the map of three islands bound in one. She knew I would turn then to stare at her, because she did not wait for that. She left quietly with the First Overlord.

I was appalled at her certainty of me, and I knew that she was right. I knew it with a loathing that began to crawl in my belly like some hideous toad.

How could I be so dedicated to this plan of mine that I would destroy in this girl a delicate monolith of love? I was a crueler man than the sea bandit who had gloried that a thousand doves cooed for death. This dove would coo forever in some dark recess of her heart.

For it is true of the women of Chacone that they will kill themselves before they will let a man other than their owner come near them. But should that owner trade them to another they will remain as faithful to the master, and will then as savagely fight off the former owner as any other man. For this they are trained from childhood in some esoteric drilling of the spirit.

Thus I saw that I was going to shut myself from the heart of the Chacone, and my anger at the king dissolved in the slime of my loathing for myself. I went to him without the slightest accusation and got his signature on the treaty with Torne and Parsos.

I went down from the shabby Tower of my homeland and walked alone among my people which are called teri che. They love to drink and there are many taverns in the city. I went into one of these and ordered spirits. Then I also ordered one for the amiable sot who instantly joined me.

We drank in silence for a while. Indeed, I had nothing to say to any man since I had shut myself from the tender heart of the Chacone. I stared without seeing across the talkative room and realized that a common man could come in here and brag with impunity that he had slept with the wives of ten lords. Then let him brag that he had slept with the Chacone of one lord, and he would be laughed out of the tavern.

The sot could stand the silence no longer. "Now, Master, you're done in, aren't you? Well, it's a fine thing you managed, getting the young prince to his Tower. Of course, this business of tying us up with Parsos and Torne, I don't see. But I suppose the king will decide on that."

I stood up to go. He grabbed my sleeve. "Now, Master, don't take offense. You ought to get to know your homeland. You've been away too long doing fine things for other islands. You ought to build a new Tower for our…"

I crashed him over the table and into the near wall.

For a moment the place went silent. The wine seller glanced from his counter and shook his head.

"Now, Master, it's a fine thing to get drunk and disorderly, but let's not tamper with life and limb."

I stalked out to the streets, and again I was alone among my people. I accepted their respectful nods and bows and understood that I would always be separated from them by this heart that could love reason so deeply and reason away love so quickly.

They were right to fear my plan to bind the islands together. The threat of the Ice Islanders was too distant and the pinched faces of their children too close to weigh against the chilling logic of the step. For it was a plan born purely of reason. It threatened much of the spirit in them that was fashioned with such disorderly grandeur from pride and prejudice and the demands of provincialism.

The street-lighters had set the lamps guttering, and the fog moved in and turned to pearl between them. Somehow the fog brought restraint and order and a muffling of guilt. As I walked the lamps came from the fog in a regular cadence and the damp planks of the street became an orderly path through chaos.

My enormous crime against the Chacone settled into a knot of guilt that I was going to have to live with. It was a guilt fate had made necessary if I was to put through the plan…and only I would put it through.

THE DOWRY OF ANGYAR

by Ursula K. Le Guin (1929 --)
Amazing Stories, September

Ursula Le Guin was a virtually unknown figure in the science-fiction world of 1964. At the time "The Dowry of Angyar" appeared, she had had just six previous stories published, all of them very short and all of them in the relatively minor magazines *Amazing* and *Fantastic.* Her first novel, *Rocannon's World,* was still two years in the future; the book that put her on the science-fiction map forever, the masterly *The Left Hand of Darkness,* would not appear until 1969.

But the wonderful clarity of hindsight shows us how shrewd it was of editor Cele Goldsmith Lalli to discover and publish this new young author's work. Even in this brief, early tale, we hear the unmistakable voice of the author of the innumerable masterpieces to come.

Galactic Area 8, No. 62: Fomalhaut II.

Life-forms of Intelligence Level K or above on Fomalhaut II fall into five distinct species and seven sociocultural races.

The large and fertile Northwestern Continent is dominated by:

Species I (Small hominids):

A) Gdemiar (Gdem) Highly intelligent troglodytic hominids, with urban and hieratic society modified by partial colonial telepathy, and technologically oriented culture. Technology is being enhanced under strict control; native hierarchs are empowered to keep and employ an automatic messenger-ship to and from New South Georgia. Status C.

B) Fiia (Fian) Highly intelligent hominids with village and nomadic societies, partial colonial telepathy and evidence of longrange TK. A-technological and evasive, but fluidity of culture patterns more promising than rigid set of race IA. Currently untaxable. Status E-query.

> *Species II* (Average hominids):
>
> Liiuar (Liu) Highly intelligent hominids with urban society, blocked technology, feudal-heroic culture. Horizontal social cleavage into two pseudo-races: (a) Olgyior, "midmen, underlings" and (b) Angyar, "hillmen, lords." Segregation has selected toward a light-skinned black-haired type (Olgyior) and a very tall, brown-skinned, yellow-haired type (Angyar)—

"That's her," said Rocannon, looking up from the *Abridged Handy Pocket Guide to Intelligent Life-forms* at the very tall, brown-skinned, yellow-haired woman who stood halfway down the long museum hall. She stood still and erect, crowned with bright hair, gazing at something in a display-case. Around her fidgeted four uneasy and unattractive dwarves.

"I'd forgotten Fomalhaut II had all those people besides the trogs," said Ketho, the curator.

"Well," said Rocannon, "now at least we know what she is."

"I wish there were some way of knowing *who* she is..."

* * *

She was of a very ancient family, a descendant of the first kings of the Angyar; for all her poverty her hair shone with the pure, steadfast gold of her inheritance. The little people, the Fiia, bowed when she passed them, even when she was a barefoot child running in the fields, the light and fiery comet of her hair brightening the troubled winds of Kirien.

She was still very young when Durhal of Hallan saw her, courted her, and carried her away from the ruined towers and windy halls of her childhood to his own high home. In Hallan on the mountainside there was no comfort either, though splendor endured. The windows were unglassed, the stone floors bare; one might wake at dawn in coldyear to see snow drifted up in one's room to the windowsill. Durhal's bride stood with narrow bare feet on the snowy floor, braiding up the fire of her hair and laughing at her young husband in the great gold-framed mirror he had hung in their room. That mirror, and his mother's bridal-gown sewn with a thousand tiny crystals, were all his wealth. Some of his lesser kinfolk of Hallan still possessed wardrobes of brocaded clothing, furniture of gilded wood, silver harness for their steeds, armor and silver-mounted swords, jewels and jewelry—and on these last Durhal's bride looked enviously, glancing back at a gemmed coronet or a golden brooch even when the wearer of the ornament stood aside to let her pass, deferent to her birth and marriage-rank. Fourth from the High Seat of Hallan Revel sat Durhal and his bride Semley, so close to Hallanlord that the old man often poured out wine for Semley with his own hand, and spoke of hunting with his grandson Durhal, looking on the young pair with a grim unhopeful love. Hope came hard to the Angyar once the Strangers had come in their windships and put an end to the old ways and wars, exacting tribute for their greater war that was to be fought with some strange enemy, somewhere in the hollow places between the stars, at the end of time. "It will be your war too," they said, but for two generations now the Angyar had sat idle in their revelhalls. They could hunt in the Forests and windride over all the Western Lands, but they must watch their swords rust, their sons grow up without ever striking a blow in battle, and their daughters marry poor men, even midmen, having no dowry of heroic loot to bring a noble husband. Hallanlord's face was bleak when he watched the fair-haired couple and heard their laughter as they drank bitter wine and joked together in the gilt-walled, ice-cold, ruinous and beautiful palace of their race.

Semley's own face hardened when she looked down the hall and saw, in seats far below hers, even down among the halfbreeds and midpeople, against pale skins and black hair, the glitter of gems and gleam of gold. She herself had brought nothing in dowry to her husband, not even a silver hairpin. The dress of a thousand crystals she had put away in a chest, for the wedding-day of her daughter, if daughter it was to be.

It was, and they called her Haldre, and when the fuzz on her little brown skull grew longer it shone with steadfast gold, the inheritance of a hundred lords, the only gold that she would ever possess...

Semley did not speak to her husband of her discontent. For all his gentleness to her, Durhal was a hard man towards weakness, and she could not have borne contempt from him. But she spoke to his sister Durossa. "My family had a great treasure once," she said. "It was a necklace all of gold, with the blue jewel set in the center—sapphire?"

Durossa shook her head smiling, not sure of the name either. It was late in warmyear, and they sat together on a stone windowseat high up in the Great Tower, where Durossa's apartment was. Widowed young, childless, she had been given in second marriage to Hallanlord, who was her mother's father. Since it was a kinmarriage and a second marriage on both sides she had not taken the title of Hallanlady which Semley would some day bear; but she sat beside the old lord in the Revelhall and poured him his wine. Older than her brother Durhal, she was fond of his young wife, and delighted in the bright-haired baby girl.

"It was bought with all the money my forebear Leynen got when he conquered the Southern Fiefs—all the money from a whole kingdom, think of it, for one necklace! Oh, it would outshine anything here in Hallan, surely, even those crystals like eagle-eggs your cousin Issar wears. It was so beautiful they gave it a name of its own; they called it the Seaheart, for the blue stone. My great-grandmother wore it."

"You never saw it?" the older woman asked lazily, gazing down at the green mountainslopes where long, long summer sent its hot and restless winds straying among the forests and whirling down white roads to the seacoast far away.

"It was lost before I was born."

"The Strangers took it in the Great Tax?"

"My father said it was stolen before the Strangers ever came to our realm. He said once an old old midwoman told him that the Fiia would know where it was."

"Those are the little midpeople you have in the south realm, are they not?"

"Little people, but not midpeople. The Fiia are not men. I suppose they're kin to the Clayfolk. But the Clayfolk are said to be ugly and misformed, and the Fiia look like children, only very thin, and wiser. Oh I wonder if they know where the Seaheart is, who stole it and where he hid it! Think if I could come into Hallan Revel and sit down by my husband with the wealth of a kingdom round my neck, and outshine the other women as he outshines all men!"

Durossa bent her head above the baby, who lay studying her brown toes on a fur rug between her mother and aunt. "Semley is foolish," she murmured to the baby, "Semley who shines like a falling star, Semley whose husband loves no gold but the gold of her hair…"

And Semley, looking out over the green slopes of summer to the distant sea, was silent.

But when another coldyear had passed, and the Strangers had come to collect their crushing tax for the war against the world's end and gone off again, and Haldre had grown into a lovely chattering child, Semley brought her one morning to Durossa's sunlit room in the tower. Semley wore an old cloak of blue, and the hood covered her hair.

"Keep Haldre for me, Durossa. I am going south to Kirien for a little time?"

"To see your father?"

"To find my inheritance. Your cousins of Harget Fief have been taunting Durhal all this coldyear, and even that halfbreed Parna can torment him because Parna's wife has a satin coverlet for her bed, and a diamond earring, and three gowns, the doughfaced, black-haired trollop! while Durhal's wife must patch her gown—"

"Is Durhal's pride in his wife, or what she wears?"

But Semley was not to be moved. "The lords of Hallan are poor men in their own hall, since this last tax. I am going to bring my dowry to my lord, as one of my lineage should."

"Semley! does Durhal know you are going?"

"My return will be a happy one—that much let him know," said young Semley, breaking for a moment into her joyful laugh; then she bent to kiss her daughter, turned, and before Durossa could speak, was gone like a quick wind over the floors of sunlit stone.

Married women of the Angyar never rode for sport, and Semley had not been from Hallan since her marriage, so now mounting the high saddle of a windsteed she felt like a girl again, like the wild maiden she had been, riding half-broken steeds on the north wind over the fields of Kirien. The beast she rode now over the hills of Hallan was of finer breed—striped coat fitting sleek over hollow, buoyant bones, green cat-eyes slitted against the wind, light and mighty wings sweeping up and down to either side of Semley, revealing and hiding, revealing and hiding the clouds above her and the hills below.

On the third morning she came to Kirien and stood again in the ruined courts. Her father had been drinking all night; just as in the old days, the morning sunlight poking through his fallen ceilings annoyed him, and the sight of his daughter only increased his annoyance. "What are you back for?" he growled, his swollen eyes glancing at her and away. The golden mane of his youth was quenched, gray strands tangled on his skull. "Did the young Halla not marry you, and you've come sneaking home?"

"I am Durhal's wife. I came to get my dowry, Father."

The drunkard growled in disgust; but she laughed at him so gently that he had to look at her again, wincing.

"Is it true that the Fiia stole the necklace Seaheart, Father ?"

"How do I know? Old tales. The thing was lost before I was born, I think. I wish I never had been. Ask the Fiia if you want to know. Get out, daughter, go back to your husband. Leave me alone here. There's no room at Kirien for girls and gold and all the rest of that story. This is the Fallen Place, the Empty Hall. The sons of Leynen are all dead, their treasures all are lost. Go on your way...."

Gray and swollen as the webspinner of ruined houses, he turned and went blundering towards the cellars where he hid from daylight.

Leading the striped windsteed of Hallan, Semley left her old home and walked down the steep hill, past the town of the midmen who greeted her with sullen awe, on over fields and pastures to a valley that was green as a painted bowl and full to the brim with sunlight. In the deep of the valley lay the village of the Fiia, and as she descended leading her steed the little, slight people ran up towards her from their huts and gardens, laughing, calling out in faint, thin voices.

"Hail Halla's bride, Kirienlady, Windborne, Semley the Fair!"

They gave her lovely names and she liked to hear them, minding not at all their laughter; for they laughed at all they said. That was her own way, to speak and laugh. She stood tall in her long blue cloak among their swirling, bowing welcome.

"Hail Lightfolk, Sundwellers, Fiia friends of men!" She laughed too as she greeted them.

They took her down into the village and brought her to one who might have been their chief. There was no telling the age of a Fian, it was hard even to tell one from another and be sure, as they moved about quick as moths round a candle, that she spoke always to the same one. But it seemed that one of them talked with her for a while, as the others looked after her steed, and brought water for her to drink, and bowls of fruit from their gardens of little trees. "O it was never the Fiia that stole the necklace of the Lord of Kirian," the little man cried. "What would the Fiia do with hard gold, Lady? For us there is sunlight in the warmyear, and in the coldyear the remembrance of sunlight; the yellow fruit, the yellow leaves in endseason, the yellow hair of our lady of Kirien; no other gold."

"Then it was some midman stole the thing ?"

Laughter rang long and faint about her. "How would a midman dare, in those days before the Strangers came? O Lady of Kirien, how the great necklace was stolen no mortal knows, not man nor midman nor Fian nor any among the Seven Folk. Only dead minds know how it was lost, long ago when Kireley the Proud whose great-granddaughter is Semley walked alone by the caves of the sea. But it may be found perhaps among the Sunhaters."

"The Clayfolk?"

A louder burst of laughter, nervous.

"Sit with us, Semley, sun-haired, returned to us from the north." She sat with them to eat, and they were pleased with her graciousness as she with theirs. But when they heard her repeat that she would go to the Clayfolk to find her inheritance, if it was there, they began not to laugh; and little by little there were fewer of them around her. She was alone at last with perhaps the one she had spoken with before the meal. "Do not go among the Clayfolk, Semley," he said, and for a moment her heart failed her. The Fian, drawing his hand down slowly over his eyes, had darkened all the air about them. Apples lay ash-white on the plate, all the bowls of clear water were empty.

"Long ago we parted," said the slight, still man of the Fiia. "Longer ago we were one. What we are not, they are. What we are, they are not. Think of the light and the grass and the apple trees, Semley; think that not all roads that lead down, lead up as well."

"Mine leads neither up nor down, O kind host, but only to my inheritance—that my husband may be proud, and my child free. I shall go to it where it is, and return with it."

The Fian bowed, laughing a little.

Outside the village she mounted her striped windsteed, and crying farewell in answer to their calling, rose up into the wind of afternoon and flew southwestwards towards the caves down by the rocky shores of Kiriensea.

She feared she might have to walk far into those tunnel-caves to find the people she sought, for it was said that the Clayfolk never came out of their caves into the light of sun or moons. It had been a long ride, and she had landed once to let her steed hunt tree-rats while she ate a little bread from her saddle-bag. The bread was hard and dry by now and tasted of leather, yet kept a faint savor of its making, so that for a moment eating it in a wild glade of some southern forest she heard the quiet tone of a voice and saw Durhal's face turned to her in the light of the many candles of Hallan. For a while she sat day-dreaming of that stern and vivid young face, and of what she would say to him when she came home with a kingdom's ransom round her neck: "I wanted a gift worthy of my husband, Lord…" So when she reached the coast the sun had set, though the stars were not yet out. A mean wind had come up from the west, starting and gusting and veering, so that her windsteed was weary fighting it. She let him glide down on the sand. At once he folded his wings and curled his thick, light limbs under him with a thrum of purring. Semley stood holding her cloak close at her throat, stroking her steed's neck so that he flicked his ears and purred again. The warm fur comforted her hand, but all that met her eyes was gray sky full of smears of cloud, gray sea, dark sand. And then running over the sand a low, dark creature; another; a group of them, squatting and running and stopping.

She called to them. In a moment they were all around her, though keeping a distance from her windsteed. He had stopped purring, and his fur rose a little under Semley's hand. She took the reins, glad of his protection but afraid of the nervous ferocity he might display. The strange folk stood silent, staring, their thick bare feet planted in the sand. There was no mistaking them: they were the height of the Fiia and in everything else a shadow, a black image of those laughing people. Naked, squat, stiff, with lank black hair and gray-white skins, dampish looking like the skins of grubs; eyes like rocks.

"You are the Clayfolk?"

"We are Gdemiar, people of the Lords of the Realms of Night." The voice was unexpectedly loud and deep, and rang out very pompous through the salt, blowing dusk; but, as with the Fiia, Semley was not sure which one had spoken.

"I greet you, Night-Lords. I am Semley of Kirien, Durhal's wife of Hallan, and have come to you seeking my inheritance, the necklace called Seaheart, lost long ago."

"Why do you seek it here, Angya? Here is only sand and salt and night."

"Because lost things are known of in deep places," said Semley, quite ready for a play of wits, "and gold that came from the earth has a way of going back to the earth. And sometimes the made returns, they say, to the maker." This last was a guess, but it hit the mark.

"It is true the necklace Seaheart is known to us by name. It was made in our caves long ago, and sold by us to the Angyar. And the blue stone came from the Clayfields of our eastern kin. But these are very old tales, Angya."

"May I listen to them in the places where they are told?"

The squat people were silent a while; Semley felt they were conferring together, consulting. Their name fitted them, she thought, for they looked like the little soul-idols savage midmen squeezed together out of clay or mud. The deep-voiced one spoke again: "Yes, lady of the Angyar. You may enter the Deep Halls. Come with us now." There was a changed note in his voice, wheedling. Semley would not hear it. She followed the Claymen over the sand, leading on a short rein her bright, sharp-taloned steed.

At the cave-mouth—a toothless, yawning mouth from which a stinking warmth sighed out—one of the Claymen said, "The air-beast cannot come in."

"Oh yes," said Semley.

"No," said the squat people.

"Yes. I will not leave him here. He is not mine to leave. He will not harm you, so long as I hold his reins."

"No," one of the deep voices repeated fiercely, but another broke in, "As you will, Lady," and after a moment of silent hesitation they went on. The mouth seemed to snap shut behind them, so dark it was under the stone. They went in single file, Semley last.

Soon the darkness of the tunnel lessened, and they came under a ball of weak white fire hanging from the roof. Farther on was another, and another; and between these globes long black worms hung, festooned like foul vines along the rock. As they went on these fire-balls grew brighter, and were set closer, till the tunnel was lit with a bright, blank, cold light.

The Claymen stopped at a parting of three tunnels, all blocked by doors that looked to be of iron. "We shall wait, Angya," said one, and eight of them stayed with her, while three passed through one of the doors, locking it again behind them with a clash.

Straight and still stood the daughter of the Angyar in the white, blank light of the strange lamps, her windsteed crouched beside her, flicking the tip of his striped tail. In the tunnel behind her the eight Claymen squatted on their hams, muttering to one another in deep voices in a tongue she did not know.

The central door swung clanging open. "Let the Angya enter the Realm of Night!" cried a new voice, booming and boastful. A Clayman who wore some shiny clothing over his thick gray body stood in the doorway beckoning to her. "Enter and behold the wonders of our lands, the marvels made by hands, the works of the Night-Lords!"

Silently, with a tug at her steed's reins, Semley bowed her head and followed him under the low doorway made for dwarfish folk. Another glaring tunnel stretched ahead, dank walls shining with the white light, but instead of a way to walk upon its floor carried two bars of polished iron stretching off side by side as far as she could see. On the bars, behind her new guide, rested some kind of cart with metal wheels. Obeying the guide's gestures, with no trace of wonder or puzzlement on her face, Semley stepped into the cart and made the windsteed crouch beside her. The Clayman got in and sat down in front of her, moving bars and wheels about. A loud grinding noise arose, and a screaming of metal on metal, and then the walls of the tunnel began to jerk by. Faster and faster the walls slid past, till the light-globes overhead ran into a blur, and the stale warm air became a foul wind blowing her hood off her.

The cart stopped. Semley followed the guide up marble steps into a vast anteroom and then a still vaster hall, carved by ancient waters or by the burrowing Clayfolk out of the rock, and lighted with the uncanny cold brilliance. In grilles cut in the walls huge blades turned and turned, changing the stale air. The great rock-enclosed space hummed and boomed with noise, the loud voices of the Clayfolk, grindings and shrill buzzing of turning blades and wheels, and the echoes and re-echoes of all this from the rock. Here all the stumpy figures of the Claymen were clothed in garments imitating those of the Strangers—divided trousers, boots, tunics with signs sewn on the sleeves—though the few women to be seen, hurrying servile dwarfs, were naked. Some of the males were soldiers, bearing at their sides weapons shaped like the terrible light-throwers of the Strangers, though even Semley could see these were merely shaped iron clubs. What she saw, she saw without looking. She followed where she was led, turning her head neither to left nor right. When she was before a group of Claymen who wore iron circlets on their black hair her guide halted, bowed, boomed out, "The High Council of Gdemtyo!"

There were seven of them, and all looked up at her with such arrogance on their lumpy gray faces that she wanted to laugh.

"I come among you seeking the lost treasure of my family, the necklace called Seaheart, O Lords of the Dark Realm."

Her voice sounded faint in the racket of the great room.

"So said our messenger, Lady Semley." She could pick out the one who spoke, one even shorter than the others, hardly reaching Semley's breast, but very broad and thick. "We do not have this thing you seek."

"Once you had it, it is said."

"Much is said, up there where the Sun blinks."

"And words are borne off by the winds, where there are winds to blow. I do not ask how the Seaheart was lost to us and returned to you, its makers of old. Those are old tales and old grudges. I only seek to find it now. You do not have it now; but it may be you know where it is?"

"It is not here."

"But where it is, you know."

"It is where you cannot come to it. Never, unless we help you."

"Then help me. I ask this as your guest, Night-Lord."

"It is said, 'The Angyar take; the Fiia give; the Gdemiar give and take.' If we do this for you, what will you give us?"

"My thanks, Clayman."

She stood tall and bright among them, smiling. They all stared at her sullenly, with a heavy grudging wonder, a kind of yearning.

"Listen, woman of the Hill-folk, this is a great favor you ask of us. You do not know how great. You cannot understand. We are a mighty people, that much you can see. Your people do not deign, or dare, to come among us. They know nothing of us. But you know a little now, you have seen a few of our endless marvels, the lights that burn forever, the railway, the machines that clothe us and feed us and make our air and serve us in all things. Know that all these things are beyond your understanding, and know this: we, the Gdemiar, are the friends of those you call the Strangers! Those to whom you, the proud Angyar, pay tribute, are our friends. They do us favors as we do them favors! Now, what do your thanks mean to us?"

"That is your question to answer," said Semley, "not mine. I have asked my question. Answer it, Lord."

For a while the seven conferred together, by word and look; Semley thought that, like the Fiia, these cave-folk must not always use words for talk. They kept looking at her, and as they muttered together a crowd grew around them, drawn silently, so that she was encircled by hundreds of the matted black heads, and there was no clear space left on the floor of the great booming cavern except directly around her. Her windsteed was quivering with fear and ferocity too long controlled. She stroked the great furry head, whispering, "Quiet now, old friend, bright one, windlord…"

"We will take you, Angya, to the place where the treasure lies," said the iron-crowned Clayman, turning to her. "More than that we cannot do. You must come with us to claim the necklace where it lies, from those who keep it. The air-beast cannot come with you. You must come alone."

"How far a journey, Lord?"

His lips drew back and back. “A very far journey, Lady. Yet it will only last but one long night.”

“I thank you for your courtesy. Will my steed be well cared for this night? No ill must come to him.”

“He will sleep till you return. A greater windsteed you will have ridden, when you see that beast again. Will you not ask where we take you?”

“Can we go soon on this journey? I would not stay long away from my home.”

“Yes: soon.” Again the gray lips widened as he stared up into her face.

What was done in those next hours Semley could not have retold; it was all haste, jumble, noise. While she held her steed’s head a gray toad of a Clayman stuck a long needle into the golden-striped haunch. She nearly screamed at the sight, but her steed merely twitched and then, purring, fell asleep. He was carried off by frightened Clayfolk. Later on she had to see a needle driven into her own arm, perhaps to test her courage, she thought, for it did not seem to make her sleep; though she was not quite sure. There were times she must travel in the railcarts, always coming to more caverns, more gray lumpy bodies and matted heads and booming, boasting voices: then out suddenly in the open air, blessed be it! for a minute, but at night and nothing to be seen but the stars. Then she must clamber into some new kind of cart or cave, she did not know which; it was small, full of little blinking lights like rushlights, crowded and clean after the great dank caverns and the starlit night. There another needle must be stuck in her, and then they told her she must be tied down in a sort of flat chair, bound head and hand and foot.

“I will not,” said Semley.

But when she saw that the four Claymen who were to be her guides let themselves be tied down first, she submitted. The others left. Then there was a great roaring, and a long silence; a great weight crushing her, and then no weight; no sound; nothing at all.

“Am I dead?” asked Semley.

“Oh no, Lady,” said a voice she did not like.

Opening her eyes she saw the broad face bent over her, the wide lips pulled back, the eyes like little stones. Her bonds had fallen away from her and she leaped up. She felt weightless, bodiless, as if she were a mere gust of terror on the wind.

“We will do you no harm,” said the sullen voice or voices. “Only let us touch you, Lady. We would like to touch your hair. Let us touch your hair…”

The round cart they were in trembled a little. Outside its one window lay blank night, or was it night, or mist, or nothing at all? One long night, they had said. Very long. She sat motionless and endured the touch of their heavy gray hands on her hair. Later on they would touch her hands and feet and arms, and one her throat: at that she set her teeth and stood up, and they drew back.

"We have not hurt you, Lady," they said. She shook her head.

When they bade her, she lay down again in the chair that bound her down; and when light flashed sudden at the window, she would have wept at the sight, but fainted first.

* * *

"Well," said Rocannon, "now at least we know what she is."

"I wish there were some way of knowing *who* she is," the Curator mumbled. "She wants something we've got here in the Museum, is that what the trogs say?"

"Now don't call 'em trogs, Ketho. Gdemiar. They're very proud people, I've had to deal with them several times... In fact, in my opinion they're plenty conceited."

"They seem to be rather in awe of her."

"Aren't you?"

Ketho glanced at the tall woman again, then reddened and laughed. "Well, in a way. I never saw such a beautiful alien type in eighteen years here on New South Georgia. I never saw such a beautiful woman anywhere. She looks like a—like a goddess." The red now reached the top of his bald head, for Ketho was a shy, curator-type curator, not given to hyperbole. But Rocannon nodded soberly, agreeing.

"I wish we could talk to her without those tr— Gdemiar as interpreters. But there's no help for it." He went towards their visitor, and when she turned her splendid face to him he bowed right down, placing his hands on his head, shutting his eyes, and bending both knees, after which he snapped erect again. This was what he called his Allpurpose Intercultural Curtsy, and he performed it with some grace. The beautiful woman smiled and spoke.

"She say, Hail, Lord Stranger," growled one of her squat escorts in Pidgin-Galactic.

"Hail, Lady Angya," Rocannon replied politely. "In what way can we of the Museum serve the lady?"

Across the troglodytes' growling her voice ran like a brief silver wind.

"She say, Please give her necklace which treasure her blood-kin-forebears long long."

"Which necklace?" he asked, and understanding him she pointed to the central display of the case before them, a magnificent thing, a chain of solid gold, massive but very delicate in workmanship, set with one single fiery-blue sapphire. Rocannon's eyebrows went up, and Ketho at his shoulder murmured, "She's got good taste. That's the Fomalhaut Necklace—famous bit of work."

She smiled at the two men, and again spoke to them over the heads of her goon-squad.

"She say, O Lord Strangers, Elder and Younger Dwellers in House of Treasures, this treasure her one. Long long time. Thank you."

"How did we get the thing, Ketho?"

"From these trogs—trolls, whatever they are: Gdemiar. It says on the card."

"That's right. They've got a bargain-obsession. We had to let them buy the AD-4 they came here on. This was part payment. It's their own handiwork. Since they've been steered to iron and steel work they don't make anything like this, no doubt."

"But they seem to feel the thing is hers, not theirs or ours. And it must be important, or they wouldn't have given up this time-span to her errand. Why, the objective lapse between here and Fomalhaut on an AD-4 must be considerable!"

"I know. I never feel I really understand these hieratic races, Ketho. Perhaps her desire is all-important because they consider themselves totally inferior to her. Or it may be courtesy they're showing her. Or an interspecies war may depend on this damn necklace. Or she may be their prisoner and decoy, despite appearances. How can we tell?...Can you give the thing away, Ketho?"

"Oh yes. All the Exotica are technically on loan, not our property, since these claims come up now and then. We seldom argue. Peace above all, until the War comes..."

"Then I'd say give it to her."

Ketho smiled. "It's a privilege," he said; and unlocking the case, he lifted out the great golden chain and with a certain air and stateliness, for all he was a small bald curator of sixty-one, held it out to the fair-haired woman.

She did not raise her hands to take it. She bent her head to Ketho, and he slipped the necklace over her hair. It lay like a fuse of fire on the golden-brown throat. She looked up from it with such a blaze of pride, delight, and gratitude in her face that Rocannon stood wordless, and Ketho murmured shyly in his own language, "You're welcome, you're very welcome." She took his hands and then Rocannon's, bowing down her golden head to them. Then, turning, she nodded to her squat guards—or captors?—and drawing her ragged blue cloak about her, paced down the long hall and was gone. Ketho and Rocannon stood looking after her.

"What I feel..." Rocannon began.

"Well?" Ketho inquired hoarsely, after a long pause.

"What I feel sometimes, is that sometimes I…meeting these people from worlds still outside the League, you know, sometimes…that I have as it were blundered through the corner of a legend, of a tragic myth, even, which I do not understand…"

"Yes," said the curator, clearing his throat. "I wonder…I wonder what her name is."

Semley the Fair, Semley the Rich, Semley of the Golden Necklace. The Clayfolk had bent to her will, and so had even the Strangers in that terrible city where the Clayfolk took her, the city at the end of the night. They had bowed to her, and given her gladly her treasure from amongst their own.

But she could not yet shake off the sense of those caves about her, where you could not tell who spoke or what they were doing, where the voices boomed and gray hands reached out— Enough of that. She had paid for the necklace, very well. Now it was hers. The price was paid, the past was past.

Her windsteed had crept out of some kind of box, with his eyes filmy and his fur rimed with ice, but by now he seemed all right again, riding a smooth south wind through the bright sky towards Hallan. "Go quick, go quick," she told him, beginning to laugh as the wind cleared her mind's darkness away, "I want to see Durhal soon, soon…"

Quick they flew, coming to Hallan by evening of the second day. Now the caves of the Clayfolk seemed very far behind, as she walked up the broad steps of Hallan between carven figures of heroes, and across the Chasm-bridge, and past the warders who bowed to her, staring at the beautiful, fiery thing around her neck.

She stopped a girl in the Forehall, a very pretty girl, by her looks one of Durhal's close kin, though Semley could not call her name to mind. "Do you know me, maiden? I am Semley, Durhal's wife. Will you go tell Lady Durossa that I have come back?"

For she was a little afraid to face Durhal at once alone; she wanted Durossa's support.

The girl was staring at her, her face very strange. But she murmured at last, "Yes, Lady," and darted off towards the Tower.

Semley stood waiting in the gilt, ruinous hail. It seemed very empty; no one came by. Presently an old woman came to her across the stones, holding her arms out, weeping.

"Oh Semley, Semley!"

"But Lady, who are you?"

She had never seen the gray-haired woman, and shrank back.

"I am Durossa, Semley."

She was quiet and still, all the time that Durossa embraced her and wept, and asked if it were true the Clayfolk had captured her and laid her under a spell all these long years, or was it the Fiia with their strange arts? Then drawing back a little, Durossa ceased to weep.

"You are still young, Semley. Young as the day you left here. And you wear round your neck the necklace..."

"I do. I have brought my gift to my husband Durhal. Where is he?"

"Durhal is dead."

Semley stood unmoving.

"Durhal the Silent, my brother, Hallanlord, was killed nine years ago, when the Strangers called on us to put down the war in the east. He was killed in battle, by a midman's spear, for he had little armor for his body, and none at all for his soul, Semley. He fell and lies buried in the eastern fields."

Semley turned away. "I will go to him," she said, laying her hand on the gold chain that weighed down her neck. "I will give him my gift."

"Wait, Semley! Durhal's daughter, your daughter, see her now, Haldre the Beautiful!"

It was the girl she had first spoken to and sent to Durossa: a maiden of nineteen or twenty, with eyes like Durhal's eyes, dark blue. She stood beside Durossa gazing with those steady eyes at this woman Semley, who was her mother, and was her own age. They might have been twin sisters: their gold hair was the same, and their beauty, and their age. Only Semley was a little taller, and wore the blue stone upon her breast.

"Take it, it's yours, it was for Durhal and Haldre that I brought it from the end of the long night!" Semley cried this out, twisting and bowing her head to get the heavy chain off, dropping the necklace so it fell on the stones with a cold, liquid clash. "O take it, Haldre!" she cried again, and then weeping aloud turned and ran from Hallan, over the bridge and down the long, broad steps, and darting off eastward into the forest of the mountainside like some wild thing escaping, was gone.

WHEN THE CHANGE-WINDS BLOW

by Fritz Leiber (1910 - 1992)
Fantasy & Science Fiction, August

Fritz Leiber was a giant figure in science fiction and fantasy from the 1940s until his death. His smoothly written and darkly disturbing stories and novels—*Conjure Wife, The Big Time, Gather, Darkness!* among them—won him a devoted following. Leiber's sprawling epic, *The Wanderer,* won the Hugo for Best Novel of 1964. This little tale, published the same year, is a lovely example of his work on a smaller scale.

I was halfway between Arcadia and Utopia, flying a long archeologic scout, looking for coleopt hives, lepidopteroid stiltcities, and ruined villas of the Old Ones.

On Mars they've stuck to the fanciful names the old astronomers dreamed onto their charts. They've got an Elysium and an Ophir too.

I judged I was somewhere near the Acid Sea, which by a rare coincidence does become a poisonous shallow marsh, rich in hydrogen ions, when the northern icecap melts.

But I saw no sign of it below me, nor any archeologic features either. Only the endless dull rosy plain of felsite dust and iron-oxide powder slipping steadily west under my flier, with here and there a shallow canyon or low hill, looking for all the world (Earth? Mars?) like parts of the Mojave.

The sun was behind me, its low light flooding the cabin. A few stars glittered in the dark blue sky. I recognized the constellations of Sagittarius and Scorpio, the red pinpoint of Antares.

I was wearing my pilot's red spacesuit. They've enough air on Mars for flying now, but not for breathing if you fly even a few hundred yards above the surface.

Beside me sat my copilot's green spacesuit, which would have had someone in it if I were more sociable or merely mindful of flying regulations. From time to time it swayed and jogged just a little.

And things were feeling eerie, which isn't how they ought to feel to someone who loves solitude as much as I do, or pretend to myself I do. But the Martian landscape is even more spectral than that of Arabia or the American Southwest—lonely and beautiful and obsessed with death and immensity and sometimes it strikes through.

From some old poem the words came, "...and strange thoughts grow, with a certain humming in my ears, about the life before I lived this life."

I had to stop myself from leaning forward and looking around into the faceplate of the green spacesuit to see if there weren't someone there now. A thin man. Or a tall slim woman. Or a black crabjointed Martian coleopteroid, who needs a spacesuit about as much as a spacesuit does. Or...who knows?

It was very still in the cabin. The silence did almost hum. I had been listening to Deimos Station, but now the outer moonlet had dropped below the southern horizon. They'd been broadcasting a suggestions program about dragging Mercury away from the sun to make it the moon of Venus—and giving both planets rotation too—so as to stir up the thick smoggy furnace-hot atmosphere of Venus and make it habitable.

Better finish fixing up Mars first, I'd thought.

But then almost immediately the rider to that thought had come: *No; I want Mars to stay lonely. That's why I came here. Earth got crowded and look what happened.*

Yet there are times on Mars when it would be pleasant, even to an old solitary like me, to have a companion. That is if you could be sure of picking your companion.

Once again I felt the compulsion to peer inside the green spacesuit.

Instead I scanned around. Still only the dust-desert drawing toward sunset; almost featureless, yet darkly rosy as an old peach. "True peach, rosy and flawless... Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe as fresh-poured wine of a mighty pulse..." *What* was *that poem?*—my mind nagged.

On the seat beside me, almost under the thigh of the green spacesuit, vibrating with it a little, was a tape: *Vanished Churches and Cathedrals of Terra.* Old buildings are an abiding interest with me, of course, and then some of the hills or hives of the black coleopts are remarkably suggestive of Earth towers and spires, even to details like lancet windows and flying buttresses, so much so that it's been suggested there is an imitative element, perhaps telepathic, in the architecture of those strange beings who despite their humanoid intelligence are very like social insects. I'd been scanning the book at my last stop, hunting out coleopt-hill resemblances, but then a cathedral interior had reminded me of the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago and I'd slipped the tape out of the projector.

That chapel was where Monica had been, getting her Ph.D. in physics on a bright June morning, when the fusion blast licked the southern end of Lake Michigan, and I didn't want to think about Monica. Or rather I wanted too much to think about her.

"What's done is done, and she is dead beside, dead long ago…"

Now I recognized the poem!—Browning's *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church.* That was a distant cry!—Had there been a view of St. Praxed's on the tape?—The 16th Century…and the dying bishop pleading with his sons for a grotesquely grand tomb—a frieze of satyrs, nymphs, the Savior, Moses, lynxes—while he thinks of their mother, his mistress…

"Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes…Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!"

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett and their great love…

Monica and myself and our love that never got started…

Monica's eyes talked. She was tall and slim and proud…

Maybe if I had more character, or only energy, I'd find myself someone else to love—a new planet, a new girl!—I wouldn't stay uselessly faithful to that old romance, I wouldn't go courting loneliness, locked in a dreaming life-in-death on Mars…

"Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask, 'Do I live, am I dead?' "

But for me the loss of Monica is tied up, in a way I can't untangle, with the failure of Earth, with my loathing of what Terra did to herself in her pride of money and power and success (communist and capitalist alike), with that unnecessary atomic war that came just when they thought they had everything safe and solved, like they felt before the one in 1914. It didn't wipe out all Earth by any means, only about a third, but it wiped out my trust in human nature—and the divine too, I'm afraid—and it wiped out Monica…

"And as she died so must we die ourselves, and thence ye may perceive the world's a dream."

A dream? Maybe we lack a Browning to make real those moments of modern history gone over the Niagara of the past, to find them again needle-in-haystack, atom-in-whirlpool, and etch them perfectly, the moments of starflight and planet-landing etched as he had etched the moments of the Renaissance.

Yet—the world (Mars? Terra?) only a dream? Well, maybe. A bad dream sometimes, that's for sure! I told myself as I jerked my wandering thoughts back to the flier and the unchanging rosy desert under the small sun.

Apparently I hadn't missed anything—my second mind had been faithfully watching and instrument-tending while my first mind rambled in imaginings and memories.

But things were feeling eerier than ever. The silence did hum now, brassily, as if a great peal of bells had just clanged, or were about to. There was menace now in the small sun about to set behind me, bringing the Martian night and what Martian were-things there may be that they don't know of yet. The rosy plain had turned sinister. And for a moment I was sure that if I looked into the green spacesuit, I would see a dark wraith thinner than any coleopt, or else a bone-brown visage fleshlessly grinning—the King of Terrors.

"Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years: Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?"

You know, the weird and the supernatural didn't just evaporate when the world got crowded and smart and technical. They moved outward—to Luna, to Mars, to the Jovian satellites, to the black tangled forest of space and the astronomic marches and the unimaginably distant bull's-eye windows of the stars. Out to the realms of the unknown, where the unexpected still happens every other hour and the impossible every other day—

And right at that moment I saw the impossible standing 400 feet tall and cloaked in lacy gray in the desert ahead of me.

And while my first mind froze for seconds that stretched toward minutes and my central vision stayed blankly fixed on that upwardly bifurcated incredibility with its dark hint of rainbow caught in the gray lace, my second mind and my peripheral vision brought my flier down to a swift, dream-smooth, skimming landing on its long skis in the rosy dust. I brushed a control and the cabin walls swung silently downward to either side of the pilots' seat, and I stepped down through the dream-easy Martian gravity to the peach-dark pillowy floor, and I stood looking at the wonder, and my first mind began to move at last.

There could be no doubt about the name of this, for I'd been looking at a taped view of it not five hours before—this was the West Front of Chartres Cathedral, that Gothic masterpiece, with its plain 12th Century spire, the *Clocher Vieux,* to the south and its crocketed 16th Century spire, the *Clocher Neuf,* to the north and between them the great rose window fifty feet across and below that the icon-crowded triple-arched West Porch.

Swiftly now my first mind moved to one theory after another of this grotesque miracle and rebounded from them almost as swiftly as if they were like magnetic poles.

I was hallucinating from the taped pictures. Yes, maybe the world's a dream. That's always a theory and never a useful one.

A transparency of Chartres had got pasted against my faceplate. Shake my helmet. No.

I was seeing a mirage that had traveled across fifty million miles of space...and some years of time too, for Chartres had vanished with the

Paris Bomb that near-missed toward Le Mans, just as Rockefeller Chapel had gone with the Michigan Bomb and St. Praxed's with the Rome.

The thing was a mimic-structure built by the coleopteroids to a plan telepathized from a memory picture of Chartres in some man's mind. But most memory pictures don't have anywhere near such precision and I never heard of the coleopts mimicking stained glass, though they do build spired nests a half thousand feet high.

It was all one of those great hypnotism-traps the Arean jingoists are forever claiming the coleopts are setting us. Yes, and the whole universe was built by demons to deceive only me—and possibly Adolf Hitler—as Descartes once hypothesized. *Stop it.*

They'd moved Hollywood to Mars as they'd earlier moved it to Mexico and Spain and Egypt and the Congo to cut expenses, and they'd just finished an epic of the Middle Ages—*The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* no doubt, with some witless producer substituting Notre Dame of Chartres for Notre Dame of Paris because his leading mistress liked its looks better and the public wouldn't know the difference. Yes, and probably hired hordes of black coleopts at next to nothing to play monks, wearing robes and humanoid masks. And why not a coleopt to play Quasimodo?—improve race relations. *Don't hunt for comedy in the incredible.*

Or they'd been giving the Martian tour to the last mad president of La Belle France to quiet his nerves and they'd propped up a fake cathedral of Chartres, all west facade, to humor him, just like the Russians had put up papier-mâché villages to impress Peter III's German wife. The Fourth Republic on the fourth planet! *No, don't get hysterical. This thing is here.*

Or maybe—and here my first mind lingered—past and future forever exist somehow, somewhere (the Mind of God? the fourth dimension?) in a sort of suspended animation, with little trails of somnambulant change running through the future as our willed present actions change it and perhaps, who knows, other little trails running through the past too?—for there may be professional time-travelers. And maybe, once in a million millennia, an amateur accidentally finds a Door.

A Door to Chartres. But when?

As I lingered on those thoughts, staring at the gray prodigy—"Do I live, am I dead?"—there came a moaning and a rustling behind me and I turned to see the green spacesuit diving out of the flier toward me, but with its head ducked so I still couldn't see inside the faceplate. I could no more move than in a nightmare. But before the suit reached me, I saw that there was with it, perhaps carrying it, a wind that shook the flier and swept up the feather-soft rose dust in great plumes and waves. And then the wind bowled me over—one hasn't much anchorage in Mars gravity—

and I was rolling away from the flier with the billowing dust and the green spacesuit that went somersaulting faster and higher than I, as if it were empty, but then wraiths are light.

The wind was stronger than any wind on Mars should be, certainly than any unheralded gust, and as I went tumbling deliriously on, cushioned by my suit and the low gravity, clutching futilely toward the small low rocky outcrops through whose long shadows I was rolling, I found myself thinking with the serenity of fever that this wind wasn't blowing across Mars-space only but through time too.

A mixture of space-wind and time-wind—what a puzzle for the physicist and drawer of vectors! It seemed unfair—I thought as I tumbled—like giving a psychiatrist a patient with psychosis overlaid by alcoholism. But reality's always mixed and I knew from experience that only a few minutes in an anechoic, lightless, null-G chamber will set the most normal mind veering uncontrollably into fantasy—or is it always fantasy?

One of the smaller rocky outcrops took for an instant the twisted shape of Monica's dog Brush as he died—not in the blast with her, but of fallout, three weeks later, hairless and swollen and oozing. I winced.

Then the wind died and the West Front of Chartres was shooting vertically up above me and I found myself crouched on the dust-drifted steps of the south bay with the great sculpture of the Virgin looking severely out from above the high doorway at the Martian desert, and the figures of the four liberal arts ranged below her—Grammar, Rhetoric, Music, and Dialectic—and Aristotle with frowning forehead dipping a stone pen into stone ink.

The figure of Music hammering her little stone bells made me think of Monica and how she'd studied piano and Brush had barked when she practiced. Next I remembered from the tape that Chartres is the legendary resting place of St. Modesta, a beautiful girl tortured to death for her faith by her father Quirinus in the Emperor Diocletian's day. Modesta—Music—Monica.

The double door was open a little and the green spacesuit was sprawled on its belly there, helmet lifted, as if peering inside at floor level.

I pushed to my feet and walked *blowing through time? Grotesque.* up the rose-mounded steps. *Dust. Yet was I more than dust? "Do I live, am I dead?"*

I hurried faster and faster, kicking up the fine powder in peach-red swirls, and almost hurled myself down on the green spacesuit to turn it over and peer into the faceplate. But before I could quite do that I had looked into the doorway and what I saw stopped me. Slowly I got to my feet again and took a step beyond the prone green spacesuit and then another step.

Instead of the great Gothic nave of Chartres, long as a football field, high as a sequoia, alive with stained light, there was a smaller, darker interior—churchly too, but Romanesque, even Latin, with burly granite columns and rich red marble steps leading up toward an altar where mosaics glittered in the gloom. One thin stream of flat light, coming through another open door like a theatrical spot in the wings, struck on the wall opposite me and revealed a gloriously ornate tomb where a sculptured mortuary figure—a bishop by his miter and crook—lay above a crowded bronze frieze on a bright green jasper slab with a blue lapis-lazuli globe of Earth between his stone knees and nine thin columns of peach-blossom marble rising around him to the canopy.

But of course: this was the bishop's tomb of Browning's poem. This was St. Praxed's church, powdered by the Rome Bomb, the church sacred to the martyred Praxed, daughter of Pudens, pupil of St. Peter, tucked even further into the past than Chartres' martyred Modesta. Napoleon had planned to liberate those red marble steps and take them to Paris. But with this realization came almost instantly the companion memory: that although St. Praxed's church had been real, the tomb of Browning's bishop had existed only in Browning's imagination and the minds of his readers.

Can it be, I thought, that not only do the past and future exist forever, but also all the possibilities that were never and will never be realized… somehow, somewhere (the fifth dimension? the Imagination of God?) as if in a dream within a dream… Crawling with change too, as artists or anyone thinks of them…Change-winds mixed with time-winds mixed with space-winds…

In that moment I became aware of two dark-clad figures in the aisle beside the tomb and studying it—a pale man with dark beard covering his cheeks and a pale woman with dark straight hair covering hers under a filmy veil. There was movement near their feet and a fat dark sluglike beast, almost hairless, crawled away from them into the shadows.

I didn't like it. I didn't like that beast. I didn't like it disappearing. For the first time I felt actively frightened.

And then the woman moved too, so that her dark wide floor-brushing skirt jogged, and in a very British voice she called, "Flush! Come here, Flush!" and I remembered that was the name of the dog Elizabeth Barrett had taken with her from Wimpole Street when she ran off with Browning.

Then the voice called again, anxiously, but the British had gone out of it now, in fact it was a voice I knew, a voice that froze me inside, and the dog's name had changed to Brush, and I looked up, and the gaudy tomb was gone and the walls had grayed and receded, but not so far as those of Chartres, only so far as those of the Rockefeller Chapel, and there coming toward me down the center aisle, tall and slim in a black academic robe with the three velvet doctor's bars on the sleeves, with the brown of science edging the hood, was Monica.

I think she saw me, I think she recognized me through my faceplate, I think she smiled at me fearfully, wonderingly.

Then there was a rosy glow behind her, making a hazily-gleaming nimbus of her hair, like the glory of a saint. But then the glow became too bright, intolerably so, and something struck at me, driving me back through the doorway, whirling me over and over, so that all I saw was swirls of rose dust and star-pricked sky.

I think what struck at me was the ghost of the front of an atomic blast.

In my mind was the thought: St. Praxed, St. Modesta, and Monica the atheist saint martyred by the bomb.

Then all winds were gone and I was picking myself up from the dust by the flier.

I scanned around through ebbing dust-swirls. The cathedral was gone. No hill or structure anywhere relieved the flatness of the Martian horizon.

Leaning against the flier, as if lodged there by the wind yet on its feet, was the green spacesuit, its back toward me, its head and shoulders sunk in an attitude mimicking profound dejection.

I moved toward it quickly. I had the thought that it might have gone with me to bring someone back.

It seemed to shrink from me a little as I turned it around. The faceplate was empty. There on the inside, below the transparency, distorted by my angle of view, was the little complex console of dials and levers, but no face above them.

I took the suit up very gently in my arms, carrying it as if it were a person, and I started toward the door of the cabin.

It's in the things we've lost that we exist most fully.

There was a faint green flash from the sun as its last silver vanished on the horizon.

All the stars came out.

Gleaming green among them and brightest of all, low in the sky where the sun had gone, was the Evening Star—Earth.

THE FIEND

by Frederik Pohl (1919 --)
Playboy, April

Frederik Pohl is science-fiction's consummate triple-threat professional. He was barely out of his teens when he was named editor of the pre-war pulp magazines *Super Science Stories* and *Astonishing Stories,* and he also wrote dozens of stories, mostly under pseudonyms, for the ephemeral magazines of the 1940 - 43 period. After his return from military service he worked for a time as a literary agent, did some book reviewing, and became an active writer again in the early 1950s, his best-known work being the novel *The Space Merchants,* written in collaboration with C. M. Kornbluth. At the same time he edited the splendid *Star Science Fiction* series of anthologies and served as behind-the-scenes consultant for Ballantine Books and *Galaxy Science Fiction* magazine. Eventually he became editor of *Galaxy* itself, as well as its companion *If,* which repeatedly won Hugos as best magazine in the late 1960s.

Through all this period he continued to write—a plethora of short stories and such superb novels as *Man Plus* (1976), a Nebula award winner; *Gateway* (1977), the first of his famous "Heechee" novels and a winner of both the Nebula and the Hugo; *Jem* (1979); and *Starburst* (1982). The Science Fiction Writers of America voted him its Grand Master award in 1992.

This cool, crisp short-short story shows this magnificent old pro at work at close to top form.

How beautiful she was, Dandish thought, and how helpless. The plastic identification ribbon around her neck stood out straight, and as she was just out of the transport capsule, she wore nothing else.

"Are you awake?" he asked, but she did not stir.

Dandish felt excitement building up inside him, she was so passive and without defense. A man could come to her now and do anything at all to her, and she would not resist. Or, of course, respond. Without touching her he knew that her body would be warm and dry. It was fully alive, and in a few minutes she would be conscious.

Dandish—who was the captain and sole crew member of the interstellar ship without a name, carrying congealed colonists across the long, slow, empty space from Earth to a planet that circled a star that had never had a name in astronomical charts, only a number, and was now called Eleanor—passed those minutes without looking again at the girl, whose name he knew to be Silvie, but whom he had never met. When he looked again she was awake, jack-knifed against the safety straps of the crib, her hair standing out around her head and her face wearing an expression of anger.

"All right. Where are you? I know what the score is," she said. "Do you know what they can do to you for this?"

Dandish was startled. He did not like being startled, for it frightened him. For nine years the ship had been whispering across space; he had had enough of loneliness to satisfy him and he had been frightened. There were 700 cans of colonists on the ship, but they lay brittle and changeless in their bath of liquid helium and were not very good company. Outside the ship the nearest human being was perhaps two light-years away, barring some chance-met ship heading in the other direction that was actually far more remote than either star, since the forces involved in stopping and matching course with a vessel bound home were twice as great as, and would take twice as much time as, those involved in the voyage itself.

Everything about the trip was frightening. The loneliness was a terror. To stare down through an inch of crystal and see nothing but far stars led to panic. Dandish had decided to stop looking out five years before, but had not been able to keep to his decision, and so now and again peeped through the crystal and contemplated his horrifying visions of the seal breaking, the crystal popping out on a breath of air, himself in his metal prison tumbling, tumbling for ever down to the heart of one of the 10,000,000 stars that lay below.

In this ship a noise was an alarm. Since no one but himself was awake, to hear a scratch of metal or a thud of a moving object striking something else, however tiny, however remote, was a threat, and more than once Dandish had suffered through an itch of fear for hours or days until he tracked down the exploded light tube or unsecured door that had startled him. He dreamed uneasily of fire. This was preposterously unlikely, in the steel and crystal ship, but what he was dreaming of was not the fire of a house but the monstrous fires in the stars beneath.

"Come out where I can see you," commanded the girl.

Dandish noted that she had not troubled to cover her nakedness. Bare she woke and bare she stayed. She had unhitched the restraining webbing and left the crib, and now she was prowling the room in which she had awakened, looking for him.

"They warned us," she called. " 'Watch the hook!' 'Look out for the space nuts!' 'You'll be sorry!' That's all we heard at the Reception Center, and now here you are, all right. Wherever you are. Where are you? For God's sake, come out where I can see you."

She half stood and half floated at an angle to the floor, nibbling at imperceptible bits of dead skin on her lips and staring warily from side to side. She said, "What was the story you were going to tell me? A subspace meteorite destroyed the ship, all but you and me, and we were doomed to fly endlessly towards nowhere, so there was nothing for us to do but try to make a life for ourselves?"

Dandish watched her through the view eyes in the reviving room, but did not answer. He was a connoisseur of victims, Dandish was. He had spent a great deal of time planning this. Physically she was perfect, very young, slim, slight. He had picked her out on that basis from among the 352 female canned colonists, leafing through the micro-file photographs that accompanied each colonist's dossier like a hi-fi hobbyist shopping through a catalogue. She had been the best of the lot.

Dandish was not skilled enough to read a personality profile, and in any event considered psychologists to be phonies and their profiles trash, so he had to go by the indices he knew. He had wanted his victim to be innocent and trusting. Silvie, 16 years old and a little below average intelligence, had seemed very promising. It was disappointing that she did not react with more fear.

"They'll give you fifty years for this!" she shouted, looking around to see where he could be hiding. "You know that, don't you?"

The revival crib, sensing that she was out of it, was quietly stowing and rearming itself, ready to be taken out and used again. Its plastic sheets slipped free of the corners, rolled up in a tight spiral and slid into a disposal chute, revealing aseptic new sheets below. Its radio-warming generators tested themselves with a surge of high-voltage current, found no flaws and shut themselves off. The crib sides folded down meekly. The instrument table hooded itself over. The girl paused to watch it, then shook her head and laughed.

"Scared of me?" she called. "Come on, let's get this over with! Or else," she added, "admit you've made a boo-boo, get me some clothes and let's talk this over sensibly."

Sorrowfully Dandish turned his gaze away. A timing device reminded him that it was time to make his routine half-hour check of the ship's systems and, as he had done more than 150,000 times already and would do 100,000 times again, he swiftly scanned the temperature readings in the can hold, metered the loss of liquid helium and balanced it against the withdrawals from the reserve, compared the ship's course with the flight plan, measured the fuel consumption and rate of flow, found all systems functioning smoothly and returned to the girl.

It had taken only a minute or so, but already she had found the comb and mirror he had put out for her and was working angrily at her hair. One fault in the techniques of freezing and revivification lay in what happened to such elaborated structures as fingernails and hair. At the temperature of liquid helium all organic matter was brittle and although the handling techniques were planned with that fact in mind, the body wrapped gently in elastic cocooning, every care exercised to keep it from contact with anything hard or sharp, nails and hair had a way of being snapped off. The Reception Center endlessly drummed into the colonists the importance of short nails and butch haircuts, but the colonists were not always convinced. Silvie now looked like a dummy on which a student wigmaker had failed a test. She solved her problem at last by winding what remained of her hair in a tiny bun and put down the comb, snapped-off strands of her hair floating in the air all about her like a stretched-out sandstorm.

She patted the bun mournfully and said, "I guess you think this is pretty funny."

Dandish considered the question. He was not impelled to laugh. Twenty years before, when Dandish was a teenager with the long permanented hair and the lacquered fingernails that were the fashion for kids that year, he had dreamed almost every night of just such a situation as this. To own a girl of his own—not to love her or to rape her or to marry her, but to possess her as a slave, with no one anywhere to stop him from whatever he chose to impose on her—had elaborated itself in a hundred variations nightly.

He didn't tell anyone about his dream, not directly, but in the school period devoted to practical psychology he had mentioned it as something he had read in a book and the instructor, staring right through him into his dreams, told him it was a repressed wish to play with dolls. "This fellow is role playing," he said, "acting out a wish to be a woman. These clear-cut cases of repressed homosexuality can take many forms…" and on and on, and although the dreams were as physically satisfying as ever, the young Dandish awoke from them both reproved and resentful.

But Silvie was neither a dream nor a doll. "I'm not a doll," said Silvie, so sharply and patly that it was a shock. "Come on out and get it over with!"

She straightened up, holding to a free-fall grip, and although she looked angry and annoyed she still did not seem afraid. "Unless you are really crazy," she said clearly, "which I doubt, although I have to admit it's a possibility, you aren't going to do anything I don't want you to do, you know. Because you can't get away with it, right? You can't kill me, you could never explain it, and besides they don't let murderers run ships in the first place, and so when we land all I have to do is yell cop and you're running a subway shuttle for the next ninety years." She giggled. "I know about that. My uncle got busted on income-tax evasion and now he's a self-propelled dredge in the Amazon delta, and you should see the letters he writes. So come on out and let's see what I'm willing to let you get away with."

She grew impatient. "Kee-rist," she said, shaking her head. "I sure get the great ones. And, oh, by the way, as long as I'm up, I have to go to the little girls' room, and then I want breakfast."

Dandish took some small satisfaction in that these requirements, at least, he had foreseen. He opened the door to the washroom and turned on the warmer oven where emergency rations were waiting. By the time Silvie came back biscuits, bacon and hot coffee were set out for her.

"I don't suppose you have a cigarette?" she asked. "Well, I'll live. How about some clothes? And how about coming out so I can get a look at you?" She stretched and yawned and then began to eat.

Apparently she had showered, as was generally desirable on awakening from freeze-sleep to get rid of the exfoliated skin, and she had wrapped her ruined hair in a small towel. Dandish had left one small towel in the washroom, reluctantly, but it had not occurred to him that his victim would wrap it around her head. Silvie sat thoughtfully staring at the remains of her breakfast and then after a while said, like a lecturer:

"As I understand it, starship sailors are always some kind of nut, because who else would go off for twenty years at a time, even for money, even for any kind of money? All right, you're a nut. So if you wake me up and won't come out, won't talk to me, there's nothing I can do about it.

"Now, I can see that even if you weren't a little loopy to start with, this kind of life would tip you. Maybe you just want a little company? I can understand that. I might even cooperate and say no more about it.

"On the other hand, maybe you're trying to get your nerve up for something rough. Don't know if you can, because they naturally screened you down fine before they gave you the job. But supposing. What happens then?

"If you kill me, they catch you.

"If you don't kill me, then I'll tell them when we land, and they catch you.

"I told you about my uncle. Right now his body is in the deepfreeze somewhere on the dark side of Mercury and they've got his brain keeping the navigation channels clear off Belem. Maybe you think that's not so bad.

Uncle Henry doesn't like it a bit. He doesn't have any company, bad as you that way, I guess, and he says his suction hoses are always sore. Of course he could always louse up on the job, but then they'd just put him some other place that wouldn't be quite as nice—so what he does is grit his teeth, or I guess you should say his grinders, and get along the best he can. Ninety years! He's only done six so far. I mean six when I left Earth, whatever that is now. You wouldn't like that. So why not come out and talk?"

Five or ten minutes later, after making faces and buttering another roll and flinging it furiously at the wall, where the disposal units sluiced it away, she said, "Damn you, then give me a book to read, anyway."

Dandish retreated from her and listened to the whisper of the ship for a few minutes, then activated the mechanisms of the revival crib. He had been a loser long enough to learn where to cut his losses. The girl sprang to her feet as the sides of the crib unfolded. Gentle tentacles reached out for her and deposited her in it, locking the webbing belt around her waist.

"You damned fool!" she shouted, but Dandish did not answer.

The anesthesia cone descended towards her struggling face, and she screamed. "Wait a minute! I never said I wouldn't—" but what she never said she wouldn't, she couldn't say, because the cone cut her off. A plastic sack stretched itself around her, molding to her face, her body, her legs, even to the strayed towel around her hair, and the revival crib rolled silently to the freezing room.

Dandish did not watch further. He knew what would happen, and besides, the timer reminded him to make his check. Temperatures, normal; fuel consumption, normal; course, normal; freezer room showed one new capsule en route to storage, otherwise normal. Goodbye, Silvie, said Dandish to himself, you were a pretty bad mistake.

Conceivably later on, with another girl....

But it had taken nine years for Dandish to wake Silvie, and he did not think he could do it again. He thought of her Uncle Henry running a dredge along the South Atlantic littoral. It could have been him. He had leaped at the opportunity to spend his sentence piloting a starship instead.

He stared out at the 10,000,000 stars below with the optical receptors that were his eyes. He clawed helplessly at space with the radars that give him touch. He wept a 5,000,000-mile stream of ions behind him from his jets. He thought of the tons of helpless flesh in his hold, the bodies in which he could have delighted, if his own body had not been with Uncle Henry's on coldside Mercury, the fears on which he could have fed, if he had been able to inspire fear. He would have sobbed, if he had had a voice to sob with.

THE LIFE HATER

by Fred Saberhagen (1930 --)
If, August

Fred Saberhagen's Berserker series—built around the powerful notion that colossal robotic machines, programmed to eliminate any life-form they encounter, have been set free by an alien race to wander the interstellar reaches—began in 1963 with "Fortress Ship," which was included in that year's volume of this series, and the much-anthologized "Goodlife" the same year. The present taut little item was the third in the series, to be followed by a lengthy group of novels and stories.

Saberhagen, a soft-spoken man who once was an editor for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and wrote its first entry on science fiction, lives in New Mexico and remains a prolific producer of science-fiction and fantasy novels distinguished by their craftsmanship and thoughtful design.

Carr swallowed a pain pill, and tried to find a less uncomfortable position in the combat chair. He keyed his radio transmitter and spoke to the rogue ship that hung before him in space.

"I come in peace. I have no weapons. I come to talk to you."

He waited. The cabin of his little one-man ship was silent. His radar screen showed the berserker machine still many light-seconds ahead of him. There was no reaction from it, but he knew that it had heard him.

Behind Carr was the Sol-type star he called sun, and his home planet, colonized from Earth a century before. It was a lonely settlement, out near the rim of the galaxy. Until now the war waged on life by the berserker machines had been a remote horror in the news stories. The colony's only real fighting ship had been sent to join Karlsen's fleet in the defense of Earth, when the berserkers were said to be massing there. But now the enemy was here, and the people of Carr's planet were readying two more ships in feverish haste—they were a small colony, and not wealthy in resources. Even when the two ships were ready, they would hardly be a match for a berserker.

When Carr had taken his plan to the leaders of the colony, they had thought him mad.

Go out and talk to it of peace and love? *Argue* with it? There might be some hope of converting the most depraved human to the cause of goodness and mercy, but what appeal could alter the built-in purpose of a machine?

"Why *not* talk to it of peace?" Carr had demanded. "Have you a better plan? I'm willing to go, I've nothing to lose."

They had looked at him, across the gulf that separates healthy planners from those who know they are dying. They thought almost any scheme would be better than his. But they could imagine nothing else to do until the warships were ready, which would be at least ten days. The little one-man ship was expendable, being unarmed. Armed, it would be no more a provocation to a berserker. In the end, they let Carr take it, hoping there was a chance his arguments might delay the inevitable attack.

For Carr himself, of course, they wasted no thought. For Carr was dying. Was as good as dead.

When Carr came within a million miles of the berserker, it stopped its own unhurried motion and seemed to wait for him, hanging in space in the orbital track of an airless planetoid, at a point from which the planetoid was still several days away.

"I am unarmed," he radioed again. "I come to talk with you, not to damage you. If those who built you were here, I would try to talk to them of peace and love. Do you understand?"

He felt sure it would understand his language. All the berserker machines had learned the universal space-travelers' tongue, from human prisoners or from each other. And he was serious about talking love to the unknown Builders. Grudges and vengeance seemed tiny things to a dying man. But the Builders would not be aboard; the berserkers had been constructed, probably, when Earthmen hunted the mammoth with spears. The Builders were lost in spacetime, along with their enemies of long ago.

Suddenly it answered him: "Little ship, maintain your present speed and course toward me. Be ready to stop when ordered."

"I—I will." In spite of being ready for it, Carr found himself stuttering and shaken at the sound of its voice, the uneven mechanical reproduction of the words of human prisoners, recorded aboard or borrowed from another machine. Now the weapons which could sterilize a planet would be trained on him alone. And there was worse than destruction to be feared, if one tenth of the stories about berserkers' prisoners were true. Carr did not let himself think about that—although the pain that racked him in momentary flood of agony made death seem almost welcome.

When he was within ten thousand miles it ordered: "Stop. Wait where you are, relative to me."

Carr obeyed instantly. Soon he saw that it had launched toward him something about the size of his own ship—a little moving dot on his video screen, coming out of the vast black fortress that floated against the stars.

Even at this range he could see how scarred and battered that fortress was. He had heard that all of these ancient machines were damaged, from their long senseless fighting across the galaxy; but surely such apparent ruin as this must be exceptional.

The berserker's launch slowed and drew up beside his ship. Soon there came a clanging at the airlock.

"Open!" demanded the radio voice. "I must search you."

"Then you will listen to me?"

"Then I will listen."

He opened the lock, and stood aside for the half dozen machines that entered. They were not unlike robot valets and workers, except that these were old and limping and worn, like their great master. Here and there a new part gleamed. But often the machines' movements were unsteady as they searched Carr, searched his cabin, probed everywhere on the little ship. One of them had to be half-carried out by its fellows, when the search was completed.

Another one of the machines, a thing with arms and hands like a man's, stayed behind. As soon as the lock had closed behind the others, it settled itself in the combat chair and began to drive the ship toward the berserker.

"Wait!" Carr protested. "I didn't surrender!" The ridiculous words hung in the air, seeming to deserve no reply. Sudden panic made Carr move without thinking; he stepped forward and grabbed at the mechanical pilot, trying to pull it from the chair. It put one metal hand against his chest and shoved him across the cabin, so that he staggered and fell in the artificial gravity, thumping his head painfully against a bulkhead. "In a matter of minutes we will talk about love and peace," said the radio voice.

Looking out a port as his ship neared the immense berserker, Carr saw the scars of battle become plainer and plainer, even to his unpracticed eye. There were holes in the hull, square miles of bendings and swellings and pits where the metal had once flowed molten.

Rubbing his bumped head, Carr felt a faint thrill of pride. We've done that to it, he thought, we soft little living things. His own martial feeling annoyed him, in a way. He had always been something of a pacifist. Of course it could hardly be thought immoral to use violence against a dangerous but inanimate machine. After some delay, a hatch opened in the berserker's side, and Carr's ship followed the berserker's launch into darkness.

Now there was nothing to be seen through the port. Soon there came a gentle bump, as of docking. The mechanical pilot shut off the drive, turned toward Carr and started to rise from the chair.

Something in it failed. Instead of rising smoothly, the pilot reared up, flailed for a moment with arms that sought a grip or balance, and then fell heavily to the deck. For half a minute it moved one arm, and made a grinding noise. Then it was still.

In the half minute of silence which followed, Carr realized that he was again master of his cabin; chance had given him that. If there was something he could do—

"Leave your ship," said the calm voice. "There is an airfilled tube fitted to your airlock. It will lead you to a place where we can talk of peace and love."

Carr's eyes, with a sort of reluctant horror, had dragged themselves to focus on the engine switch, and beyond that, to the C-plus activator.

The C-plus jump was not usable as a drive anywhere near the huge mass of a sun. In such proximity as this to a mass even the size of the surrounding berserker, the effect became only a weapon—a weapon of tremendous potential power.

Carr did not—or thought he did not—any longer fear sudden death; he was too near to the slow, sure kind. But now he found that with all his heart and soul he feared what might be prepared for him outside the airlock. All the horror stories came back. The thought of going out through that airlock now was unendurable. It was less terrifying for him to step carefully around the fallen pilot, to reach the controls and turn the engine back on.

"I can talk to you from here," he said, his voice quavering in spite of an effort to keep it steady.

After about ten seconds, the berserker said: "Your C-plus drive has safety devices. You will not be able to kamikaze me."

"You may be right," said Carr after a moment's thought. "But if a safety device does function, it might hurl my ship away from your center of mass, right through your hull. And your hull is in bad shape now. You don't want any more damage."

"You would die."

"I'll have to die sometime. But I didn't come out here to die, or to fight. I came to talk with you, to try to reach some agreement."

"What kind of agreement?"

At last Carr took a deep breath, and marshaled the arguments he had so often rehearsed. He kept his fingers resting gently on the C-plus activator, and his eyes alert on the instruments that normally monitored the hull for micrometeorite damage.

"I've had the feeling," he began, "that your attacks upon humanity may be only some ghastly mistake. Certainly we were not your original enemy."

"Life is my enemy. Life is evil." Pause. "Do you want to become goodlife?"

Carr closed his eyes for a moment; some of the horror stories were coming to life. But then he went firmly on with his argument. "From our point of view, it is you who are bad. We would like you to become a good machine, one that helps men instead of killing. Is not building a higher purpose than destroying?"

There was a longer pause. "What evidence can you offer that I should change my purpose?"

"For one thing, helping us will be a purpose easier of achievement. No one will damage you and oppose you."

"What is it to me, if I am damaged and opposed?"

Carr tried again. "Life is basically superior to non-life; and man is the highest form of life."

"What evidence do you offer?"

"Man has a spirit."

"I have learned that men claim that. But do you not define this spirit as something beyond the perception of any machine? And are there not men who deny that this spirit exists?"

"Spirit is so defined. And there are such men."

"Then I do not accept the argument of spirit."

Carr dug out a pain pill and swallowed it. "Still, you have no evidence that spirit does not exist. You must consider it as a possibility."

"That is correct."

"But leaving spirit out of the argument for now, consider the physical and chemical organization of life. Do you know anything of the delicacy and intricacy or organization in even a single living cell? And surely you must admit we humans carry wonderful computers inside our few cubic inches of skull."

"I have never had an intelligent captive to dissect," the mechanical voice informed him blandly, "though I have received some relevant data from other machines. But you admit that your form is the determined result of the operation of physical and chemical laws?"

"Have *you* ever thought that those laws may have been designed to do just that—produce brains capable of intelligent action?"

There was a pause that stretched on and on. Carr's throat felt dry and rough, as if he had been speaking for hours.

"I have never tried to use that hypothesis," it answered suddenly. "But if the construction of intelligent life is indeed so intricate, so dependent upon the laws of physics being as they are and not otherwise—then to serve life may be the highest purpose of a machine."

"You may be sure, our physical construction is intricate." He wasn't sure he could follow the machine's line of reasoning, but that hardly mattered if he could somehow win the game of Life. He kept his fingers on the C-plus activator.

The berserker said: "If I am able to study some living cells—"

Like a hot iron on a nerve, the meteorite-damage indicator moved; something was at the hull. "Stop that!" he screamed, without thought. "The first thing you try, I'll kill you!"

Its voice was unevenly calm, as always. "There may have been some accidental contact with your hull. I am damaged and many of my commensal machines are unreliable. I mean to land on this approaching planetoid to mine for metal and repair myself as far as possible." The indicator was quiet again.

The berserker resumed its argument. "If I am able to study some living cells from an intelligent life-unit for a few hours, I expect I will find strong evidence for, or against, your argument. Will you provide me with cells?"

"You must have had prisoners, sometime." He said it as a suspicion; he really knew no reason why it must have had human captives. It could have learned the language from another berserker.

"No, I have never taken a prisoner."

It waited. The question it had asked still hung in the air.

"The only human cells on this ship are my own. Possibly I could give you a few of them."

"Half a cubic centimeter should be enough; not a dangerous loss for you, I believe. I will not demand part of your brain. Also I understand that you wish to avoid the sensation called pain. I am willing to help you avoid it, if possible."

Did it want to drug him? That seemed too simple. Always unpredictability, the stories said, and sometimes a subtlety out of hell.

He went on with the game. "I have all that is necessary. Be warned that my attention will hardly waver from the control panel. Soon I will place a tissue sample in the airlock for you."

He got the medical kit, took two pain-killers, and set very carefully to work with a sterile scalpel. He had had some biological training.

When the small wound was bandaged, he cleansed the tissue sample of blood and lymph and with unsteady fingers sealed it into a little tube.

Without letting down his guard for an instant, he dragged the fallen pilot to the airlock and left it there with the tissue sample. Utterly weary, he got back to the combat chair. When he switched the outer door open, he heard something come into the lock, and leave again.

He took a pep pill. It would stimulate some pain, but he'd be alert.

Two hours passed. Carr forced himself to eat some emergency rations, watched the panel, and waited.

He gave a startled jump when the berserker spoke again; nearly six hours had gone by.

"You are free to leave," it was saying. "Tell the leading life-units of your planet that when I have refitted, I will be their ally. The study of your cells has convinced me that the human body is the highest creation of the universe, and that I should make helping you my purpose. Do you understand?"

Carr felt numb. "Yes. Yes. I have convinced you. After you have refitted, you will fight on our side."

Something shoved hugely and gently at his hull. Through a port he saw stars, and realized that the great hatch through which his ship had entered was swinging open.

This far within the system, Carr necessarily kept his ship in normal space to travel. It meant he could see the berserker as he fled from it, and he kept it in sight as long as possible. His last sight of the berserker showed it moving as if indeed about to let down upon the airless planetoid. Certainly it was not following him.

A couple of hours after being freed, he roused himself from contemplation of the radar screen, and went to spend a full minute considering the inner airlock door. At last he shook his head, dialed air into the lock, and entered it. The pilot was gone, with the tissue sample. There was nothing strange to be seen. Carr took a deep breath, as if relieved, closed up the lock again, and went to a port to spend some time watching the stars.

After a day he began to decelerate, so that when hours had added into another day, he was still a good distance from home. He ate, and slept, and watched his face in a mirror. He weighed himself, and he watched the stars some more, with great interest, like a man examining something long forgotten.

In two more days, gravity bent his course into a hairpin ellipse around his home planet. With his whole world bulking between him and the berserker's rock, Carr began to use his radio.

"Ho, on the ground! Good news."

The answer came almost instantly. "We've been tracking you, Carr. What's going on? What happened?"

He told them of his encounter with the berserker. "So that's the story up to now," he finished. "I expect the thing really needs to refit. It is seriously damaged. Two warships attacking it now should easily win."

"Yes." There was excited talk in the background. Then the voice was back, sounding uneasy. "Carr—you haven't started a landing approach yet, so maybe you understand. We've got to be careful. The thing was probably lying to you."

"Oh, I know. Even that pilot's collapse might have been staged. I guess the berserker was too badly shot up to want to risk a battle, so it tried another way. Must have sneaked the stuff into my cabin air, just before it let me go—or maybe left it in my airlock."

"What stuff?"

Carr said, "The stuff you're worrying about. The poison it thinks will kill us all. I'd guess it's some freshly mutated virus, designed for specific virulence against the tissue I gave it. It expected I'd hurry home and land before getting sick, and spread a new plague. It must have thought it was inventing biological warfare, using life against life, as we use machines against machines. But it needed that tissue sample to blood its pet viruses. It didn't know our chemistry. It must have been telling the truth about never having a human prisoner."

"Some virus, you think? What's it doing to you, Carr? Are you in pain—I mean, more than before?"

"No." Carr swirled his chair to look at the little chart he had begun. It showed that in the last two days his weight loss had started to reverse itself. He looked down at his body, at the bandaged place near the center of a discolored, inhuman-looking area. That area was smaller than it had been, and he saw a hint of new and healthy skin.

"What *is* the stuff doing to you?"

Carr allowed himself to smile, and to speak aloud his growing hope. "I think it's killing off my cancer."

NEIGHBOR

by Robert Silverberg (1935 --)
Galaxy, August

This story was a runner-up for selection in Judith Merril's *Year's Best SF* anthology #10, which covered 1964, but didn't make the final book. If it had, it would have been the first appearance of a story by Silverberg, whose work had been appearing in print for over a decade then, in a best-of-the-year anthology. We take this opportunity of retroactively making that happen.

I

Fresh snow had fallen during the night. Now it lay like a white sheet atop the older snow, nine or ten feet of it, that already covered the plain. Now all was smooth and clear almost to the horizon. As Michael Holt peered through the foot-thick safety glass of his command room window, he saw, first of all, the zone of brown earth, a hundred yards in diameter, circling his house, and then the beginning of the snowfield with a few jagged bare trees jutting through it, and then, finally, a blot on the horizon, the metallic tower that was Andrew McDermott's dwelling.

Not in seventy or eighty years had Holt looked at the McDermott place without feeling hatred and irritation. The planet was big enough, wasn't it? Why had McDermott chosen to stick his pile of misshapen steel down right where Holt had to look at it all his days? McDermott's estate was big enough. McDermott could have built his house another fifty or sixty miles to the east, near the banks of the wide, shallow river that flowed through the heart of the continent. He hadn't cared to. Holt had politely suggested it, when the surveyors and architects first came out from Earth. McDermott had just as politely insisted on putting his house where he wanted to put it.

It was still there. Michael Holt peered at it, and his insides roiled. He walked to the control console of the armament panel, and let his thin, gnarled hands rest for a moment on a gleaming rheostat.

There was an almost sexual manner to the way Holt fondled the jutting knobs and studs of the console. Now that his two hundredth year was approaching, he rarely handled the bodies of his wives that way any more. But then he did not love his wives as keenly as he loved the artillery emplacement with which he could blow Andrew McDermott to atoms.

Just let him provoke me, Holt thought.

He stood by the panel, a tall, gaunt man with a withered face and a savage hook of a nose and a surprisingly thick shock of faded red hair. He closed his eyes and allowed himself the luxury of a daydream.

He imagined that Andrew McDermott had given him offense. Not simply the eternal offense of being there in his view, but some direct, specific affront. Poaching on his land, perhaps. Or sending a robot out to hack down a tree on the borderland. Or putting up a flashing neon sign that mocked Holt in some vulgar way. Anything that would serve as an excuse for hostilities.

And then: Holt saw himself coming up here to the command room and broadcasting an ultimatum to the enemy. "Take that sign down, McDermott," he might say. "Keep your robots off my land," perhaps. Or else, "This means war!"

McDermott would answer with a blast of radiation, of course, because that was the kind of sneak he was. The deflector screens of Holt's front line defenses would handle the bolt with ease, soaking it in and feeding the energy straight to Holt's own generators.

Then, at long last, Holt would answer back. His fingers would tighten on the controls. Crackling arcs of energy would leap toward the ionosphere and bound downward at McDermott's place, spearing through his pitiful screens as though they weren't there. Holt saw himself gripping the controls with knuckle-whitening fervor, launching thunderbolt after thunderbolt while on the horizon Andrew McDermott's hideous keep blazed and glowed in hellish fire and crumpled and toppled and ran in molten puddles over the snow.

Yes, that would be the moment to live for!

That would be the moment of triumph!

To step back from the controls at last, and look through the window and see the glowing red spot on the horizon where the McDermott place had been. To pat the controls as though they were the flanks of a beloved old horse. To leave the house, and ride across the borderland into the McDermott estate, and see the charred ruin, and know that he was gone forever.

Then, of course, there would be an inquiry. The fifty lords of the planet would meet to discuss the battle, and Holt would explain, "He wantonly provoked me. I need not tell you how he gave me offense by building his house within my view. But this time—"

And Holt's fellow lords would nod sagely. They would understand, for they valued their own unblemished views as highly as Holt himself. They would exonerate him and grant him McDermott's land, as far as the horizon, so no newcomer could repeat the offense.

Michael Holt smiled. The daydream left him satisfied. His heart raced perhaps a little too enthusiastically as he pictured that slagheap on the horizon. He made an effort to calm himself. He was, after all, a fragile old man, much as he hated to admit it, and even the excitement of a daydream taxed his strength.

He walked away from the panel, back to the window.

Nothing had changed. The zone of brown earth where his melters kept back the snow, and then the white field, and finally the excrescence on the horizon, glinting coppery red in the thin midday sunlight. Holt scowled. The daydream had changed nothing. No shot had been fired. McDermott's keep still stained the view. Turning, Holt began to shuffle slowly out of the room, toward the dropshaft that would take him five floors downward to his family.

II

The communicator chimed. Holt stared at the screen in surprise.

"Yes?"

"An outside call for you, Lord Holt. Lord McDermott is calling," the bland metallic voice said.

"Lord McDermott's secretary, you mean?"

"It is Lord McDermott himself, your lordship."

Holt blinked. "You're joking," he said. "It's fifty years since he called me. If this is a prank I'll have your circuits shorted!"

"I cannot joke, your lordship. Shall I tell Lord McDermott you do not wish to speak to him?"

"Of course!" Holt snapped. "No—wait. Find out what he wants. *Then* tell him I can't speak to him."

Holt sank back into a chair in front of the screen. He nudged a button with his elbow, and tiny fingers began to massage the muscles of his back, where tension poisons had suddenly flooded in to stiffen him.

McDermott calling? What for?

To complain, of course. Some trespass, no doubt. Some serious trespass, if McDermott felt he had to make the call himself.

Michael Holt's blood warmed. Let him complain! Let him accuse, let him bluster! Perhaps this would give the excuse for hostilities at last. Holt ached to declare war. He had been building his armaments patiently for decade after decade, and he knew beyond doubt that he had the capability to destroy McDermott within moments after the first shot was fired. No screens in the universe could withstand the array of weaponry Holt had assembled. The outcome of a conflict was in no doubt. *Let him start something,* Michael Holt prayed. *Oh, let him be the aggressor! I'm ready for him, and more than ready!*

The bell chimed again. The robot voice of Holt's secretary said, "I have spoken to him, your lordship. He will tell me nothing. He wants you."

Holt sighed. "Very well. Put him on, then."

There was a moment of electronic chaos on the screen as the robot shifted from the inside channel to an outside one. Holt sat stiffly, annoyed by the sudden anxiety he felt. He realized, strangely, that he had forgotten what his enemy's voice sounded like. All communication between them had been through robot intermediaries for years.

The screen brightened and showed a test pattern. A hoarse, querulous voice said, "Holt? Holt, where are you?"

"Right here in my chair, McDermott. What's troubling you?"

"Turn your visual on. Let me have a look at you, Holt."

"You can speak your piece without seeing me, can't you? Is my face that fascinating to you?"

"Please. This is no time for bickering. Turn the visual on!"

"Let me remind you," Holt said coldly, "that *you* have called *me*. The normal rules of etiquette require that I have the privilege of deciding on the manner of transmission. And I prefer not to be seen. I also prefer not to be speaking to you. You have thirty seconds to state your complaint. Important business awaits me."

There was silence. Holt gripped the arms of his chair and signaled for a more intense massage. He became aware, in great irritation, that his hands were trembling. He glared at the screen as though he could burn his enemy's brain out simply by sending angry thoughts over the communicator.

McDermott said finally, "I have no complaint, Holt. Only an invitation."

"To tea?" Holt sneered.

"Call it that. I want you to come here, Holt."

"You've lost your mind!"

"Not yet. Come to me. Let's have a truce," McDermott rasped. "We're both old, sick, stupid men. It's time to stop the hatred."

Holt laughed. "We're both old, yes. But I'm not sick and you're the only stupid one. Isn't it a little late for the olive branch?"

"Never too late."

"You know there can't ever be peace between us," Holt said. "Not so long as that eyesore of yours sticks up over the trees. It's a cinder in my eye, McDermott. I can't ever forgive you for building it."

"Will you listen to me?" McDermott said. "When I'm gone, you can blast the place apart, if it pleases you. All I want is for you to come here. I—I need you, Holt. I want you to pay me a visit."

"Why don't you come here, then?" Holt jeered. "I'll throw my door wide for you. We'll sit by the fire and reminisce about all the years we hated each other."

"If I could come to you," McDermott said, "there would be no need for us to meet at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Turn your visual on, and you'll see."

Michael Holt frowned. He knew he had become hideous with age, and he was not eager to show himself to his enemy. But he could not see McDermott without revealing himself at the same time. With an abrupt, impulsive gesture, Holt jabbed the control button in his chair. The mists on the screen faded, and an image appeared.

All Holt could see was a face, shrunken, wizened, wasted. McDermott was past two hundred, Holt knew, and he looked it. There was no flesh left on his face. The skin lay like parchment over bone. The left side of his face was distorted, the nostril flared, the mouth-corner dragged down to reveal the teeth, the eyelid drooping. Below the chin, McDermott was invisible, swathed in machinery, his body cocooned in what was probably a nutrient bath. He was obviously in bad shape.

He said, "I've had a stroke, Holt. I'm paralyzed from the neck down. I can't hurt you."

"When did this happen?"

"A year ago."

"You've kept very quiet about it," Holt said.

"I didn't think you'd care to know. But now I do. I'm dying, Holt, and I want to see you once face to face before I die. I know you're suspicious. You think I'm crazy to ask you to come here. I'll turn my screens off. I'll send all my robots across the river. I'll be absolutely alone here, helpless, and you can come with an army if you like. There. Doesn't that sound like a trap, Holt? I know I'd think so if I were in your place and you were in mine. But it isn't a trap. Can you believe that? I'll open my door to you. You can come and laugh in my face as I lie here. But come. There's something I have to tell you, something of vital importance to you. And you've got to be here in person when I tell you. You won't regret coming. Believe that, Holt."

Holt stared at the wizened creature in the screen, and trembled with doubt and confusion.

The man must be a lunatic! It was years since Holt had last stepped beyond the protection of his own screens. Now McDermott was asking him not only to go into the open field, where he might be gunned down with ease, but to enter into McDermott's house itself, to put his head right between the jaws of the lion.

Absurd!

McDermott said, "Let me show you my sincerity. My screens are off. Take a shot at the house. Hit it anywhere. Go ahead. Do your worst!"

Deeply troubled, chilled with mystification, Holt elbowed out of his chair and went beyond the range of the visual pickup, over to the control console of the guns. How many times in dreams he had fondled these studs and knobs, never once daring to fire them except in test shots directed at his own property! It was unreal to be actually training the sights on the gleaming tower of McDermott's house at last. Excitement surged in him. Could this all be some subtle way, he wondered, of causing him to have a fatal heart attack through overstimulation?

He gripped the controls. He pondered, considered tossing a thousand megawatt beam at McDermott, then decided to use something a little milder. If the screens really were down all the way, even his feeblest shot would score.

He sighted—not on the house itself, but on a tree just within McDermott's inner circle of defense. He fired, still half convinced he was dreaming. The tree became a yard-high stump.

"That's it," McDermott called. "Go on. Aim at the house, too! Knock a turret off—the screens are down!"

Senile dementia, Holt thought. Baffled, he lifted the sight a bit and let the beam play against one of McDermott's outbuildings. The shielded wall glowed a moment, then gave as the beam smashed its way through. Ten square feet of McDermott's castle now was a soup of protons, fleeing into the cold.

Holt realized in stunned disbelief that there was nothing at all preventing him from destroying McDermott and his odious house entirely.

There was no risk of a counterattack. He would not even need to use the heavy artillery that he had been so jealously hoarding against this day. A light beam would do it easily enough.

It would be too easy this way, though.

There could be no pleasure in a wanton attack. McDermott had not provoked him. Rather, he sat there in his cocoon, sniveling and begging to be visited.

Holt returned to the visual field. "I must be as crazy as you are," he said. "Turn your robots loose and leave your screens down. I'll come to visit you. I wish I understood this, but I'll come anyway."

III

Michael Holt called his family together. Three wives, the eldest near his own age, the youngest only seventy. Seven sons, ranging in age from sixty to a hundred thirteen. The wives of his sons. His grandchildren. His top echelon of robots.

He assembled them in the grand hall of Holt Keep, took his place at the head of the table, and stared down the rows at their faces, so like his own. He said quietly, "I am going to pay a call on Lord McDermott."

He could see the shock on their faces. They were too well disciplined to speak their minds, of course. He was Lord Holt. His word was law, and he could, if he so pleased, order them all put to death on the spot. Once, many years before, he had been forced to assert his parental authority in just such a way, and no one would ever forget it.

He smiled. "You think I've gone soft in my old age, and perhaps I have. But McDermott has had a stroke. He's completely paralyzed from the neck down. He wants to tell me something, and I'm going to go. His screens are down and he's sending all his robots out of the house. I could have blasted the place apart if I wanted to."

He could see the muscles working in the jaws of his sons. They wanted to cry out, but they did not dare.

Holt went on, "I'm going alone except for a few robots. If there's been no word from me for half an hour after I'm seen entering the house, you're authorized to come after me. If there's any interference with the rescue party, it will mean war. But I don't think there'll be trouble. Anyone who comes after me in less than half an hour will be put to death."

Holt's words died away in a shiver of echoes. He eyed them all, one at a time.

This was a critical moment, he knew. If they dared, they might decide among themselves that he had gone mad, and depose him. That had happened before, too, in other families. They could topple him, reprogram all the robots to take commands from them instead and confine him to his wing of the house. He had given them evidence enough, just now, of his irresponsibility.

But they made no move. They lacked the guts. He was head of the household, and his word was law. They sat, pale and shaken and dazed, as he rolled his chair past them and out of the grand hall.

Within an hour, he was ready to go. Winter was in the fourth of its seven months, and Michael Holt had not left the house since the first snowfall. But he had nothing to fear from the elements. He would not come in contact with the frigid air of the sub-zero plain. He entered his car within his own house, and it glided out past the defense perimeter, a gleaming dark teardrop sliding over the fresh snow. Eight of his robots accompanied him, a good enough army for almost any emergency.

A visual pickup showed him the scene at McDermott Keep. The robots were filing out, an army of black ants clustering around the great gate. He could see them marching eastward, vanishing from sight beyond the house. A robot overhead reported that they were heading for the river by the dozens.

The miles flew past. Black, twisted trees poked through the snow, and Holt's car weaved a way through them. Far below, under many feet of whiteness, lay the fertile fields. In the spring all would be green. The leafy trees would help to shield the view of McDermott Keep, though they could not hide it altogether. In winter, the ugly copper-colored house was totally visible. That made the winters all the more difficult for Holt to endure.

A robot said softly, "We are approaching the borderlands, your lordship."

"Try a test shot to see if his screens are still down."

"Shall I aim for the house?"

"No. A tree."

Holt watched. A thick-boled, stubby tree in McDermott's front palisade gleamed a moment, and then was gone.

"The screens are still down," the robot reported.

"All right. Let's cross the border."

He leaned back against the cushion. The car shot forward.

They left the bounds of Holt's own estate, now, and entered McDermott's.

There was no warning ping to tell them they were trespassing. McDermott had even turned off the boundary scanners, then. Holt pressed sweaty palms together. More than ever now he felt that he had let himself be drawn into some sort of trap. There was no turning back now. He was across the border, into McDermott's own territory. Better to die boldly, he thought, than to live huddled in a shell.

He had never been this close to McDermott Keep before. When it was being built, McDermott had invited him to inspect it, but Holt had of course refused. Nor had he been to the housewarming. Alone among the lords of the planet, he had stayed home to sulk. He could hardly even remember when he had last left his own land at all. There were few places to go on this world, with its fifty estates of great size running through the temperate belt. Whenever Holt thirsted for the companionship of any of his fellow lords, which was not often, he could have it easily enough via telescreen. Some of them came to him, now and then.

It was strange that when he finally did stir to pay a call, it should be a call on McDermott.

Drawing near the enemy keep, he found himself reluctantly admitting that it was less ugly at close range than it seemed from the windows of Holt Keep. It was a great blocky building, hundreds of yards long, with a tall octagonal tower rising out of its northern end, a metal spike jabbing perhaps five hundred feet high. The reflected afternoon light, bouncing from the snowfield, gave the metal-sheathed building a curiously oily look, not unattractive at this distance.

"We are within the outer defense perimeter," a robot told Holt.

"Keep going."

The robots sounded worried and perturbed, he thought. Of course, they weren't programmed to show much emotional range, but he could detect a note of puzzlement in what they said and how they said it. They couldn't understand this at all. It did not seem to be an invasion of McDermott Keep—that they could have understood. But it was not a friendly visit, either. The robots did not know what to make of this journey.

They were not alone in their confusion at this most unusual situation, Holt thought grimly. He sat back nervously as he and his guardian robots were swiftly carried forward.

IV

When they were a hundred yards from the great gate of McDermott Keep, the doors swung wide. Holt called McDermott and said, "See that those doors stay open all the time I'm here. If they begin to close, there'll be trouble."

McDermott said, "Don't worry. I'm not planning any tricks."

Holt's car shot between the gate walls, and he knew that now he was at his enemy's mercy in earnest. His car rolled up to the open carport, and went on through, so that now he was actually within McDermott Keep. His robots followed him through.

"May I close the carport?"

"Keep it open!" Holt said. "I don't mind the cold."

The hood of his car swung back. His robots helped him out. Holt shivered momentarily as the cold outside air, filtering into the carport, touched him. Then he passed through the irising inner door and, flanked by two sturdy robots, walked slowly but doggedly into the Keep.

McDermott's voice reached him over a loudspeaker. "I am on the third floor of the tower," he said. "If I had not sent all the robots away, I could have let one of them guide you."

"You could send a member of your family down," Holt said sourly.

McDermott ignored that. "Continue down the corridor until it turns. Go past the armor room. You will reach a dropshaft that leads upward."

Holt and his robots moved through the silent halls.

The place was like a museum. The dark, high-vaulted corridor was lined with statuary and artifacts, everything musty-looking and depressing. How could anyone want to live in a tomb like this? Holt passed a shadowy room where ancient suits of armor stood mounted. He could not help but compute the cost of shipping such useless things across the light-years from Earth.

They came to the dropshaft. Holt and his two robots entered. A robot nudged the reversing stud, and up they went, into the tower Holt had hated so long. McDermott guided them with a word or two.

They passed down a long hall whose dull, dark walls were set off by a gleaming floor that looked like onyx. A sphincter opened, admitting them to an oval room ringed by windows, exhaling a dry, foul stench of death and decay.

Andrew McDermott sat squarely in the middle of the room, nesting in his life-capsule. A tangled network of tubes and pipes surrounded him. All of McDermott that was visible was a pair of eyes, two shining coals in the wasted face.

"I'm glad you came," McDermott said. His voice, without benefit of electronic amplification, was thin and feeble, like the sound of feathers brushing through the air.

Holt stared at him in fascination. "I never thought I'd see this room," he said.

"I never thought you would either. But it was good of you to come, Holt. You look well, you know. For a man your age." The thin lips curled in a grotesque twisted smile. "Of course, you're still a youngster. Not even two hundred yet. I've got you by thirty-odd years."

Holt did not feel like listening to the older man's ramblings. "What is it you wanted?" he asked without warmth. "I'm here, but I'm not going to stay all day. You said you had something vital to tell me."

"Not really to tell," McDermott said. "More to ask. A favor. I want you to kill me, Holt."

"What?"

"It's very simple. Disconnect my feed line. There it is, right by my feet. Just rip it out. I'll be dead in an hour. Or do it even more quickly. Turn off my lungs. This switch, right here. That would be the humane way."

"You have a strange sense of humor," Holt said.

"Do you think so? Top the joke, then. Throw the switch and cap the jest."

"You made me come all the way here to *kill* you?"

"Yes," McDermott said. The blazing eyes were unblinking now. "I've been immobilized for a year now. I'm a vegetable in this thing. I sit here day after day, idle, bored. And healthy. I might live another hundred years—do you realize that, Holt? I've had a stroke, yes. I'm paralyzed. But my body's still vigorous. This damned capsule of mine keeps me in tone. It feeds me and exercises me and—*do you think I want to go on living this way, Holt?* Would you?"

Holt shrugged. "If you want to die, you could ask someone in your family to unplug you."

"I have no family."

"Is that true? You had five sons—"

"Four dead, Holt. The other one gone to Earth. No one lives here any more. I've outlasted them all. I'm as eternal as the heavens. Two hundred thirty years, that's long enough to live. My wives are dead, my grandchildren gone away. They'll come home when they find they've inherited. Not before, There's no one here to throw the switch."

"Your robots," Holt suggested.

Again the grim smile. "You must have special robots, Holt. I don't have any that can be tricked into killing their master. I've tried it. They know what'll happen if my life-capsule is disconnected. They won't do it. *You* do it, Holt! Turn me off. Blow the tower to hell, if it bothers you. You've won the game. The prize is yours."

There was a dryness in Holt's throat, a band of pressure across his chest. He tottered a little.

His robots, ever sensitive to his condition, steadied him and guided him to a chair. He had been on his feet a long time for a man of his age. He sat quietly until the spasm passed.

Then he said, "I won't do it."

"Why not?"

"It's too simple, McDermott. I've hated you too long. I can't just flip a switch and turn you off."

"Bombard me, then. Blast the tower down!"

"Without provocation? Do you think I'm a criminal?" Holt asked.

"What do you want me to do?" McDermott said tiredly. "Order my robots to trespass? Set fire to your orchards? What will provoke you, Holt?"

"Nothing," Holt said. "I don't want to kill you. Get someone else to do it."

The eyes glittered. "You devil," McDermott said. "You absolute devil. I never realized how much you hated me. I send for you in a time of need, asking to be put out of my misery, and will you grant me that? Oh, no. Suddenly you get noble. You won't kill me! You devil, I see right through you. You'll go back to your keep and gloat because I'm a living dead man here. You'll chuckle to yourself because I'm alone and frozen into this capsule. Oh, Holt, it's not right to hate so deeply! I admit I've given offense. I deliberately built the tower here to wound your pride. Punish me, then. Take my life. Destroy my tower. Don't leave me here!"

Holt was silent. He moistened his lips, filled his lungs with breath, got to his feet. He stood straight and tall, towering over the capsule that held his enemy.

"Throw the switch," McDermott begged.

"I'm sorry."

"Devil!"

Holt looked at his robots. "It's time to go," he said. "There's no need for you to guide us. We can find our way out."

V

The teardrop-shaped car sped across shining snow. Holt said nothing as he made the return journey.

His mind clung to the image of the immobilized McDermott, and there was no room for any other thought. That stench of decay that tingled in his nostrils—that glint of madness in the eyes as they begged for oblivion.

They were crossing the borderlands now. Holt's car broke the warning barrier and got a pinging signal to halt and identify. A robot gave the password, and they went on toward Holt Keep.

His family clustered near the entrance, pale, mystified. Holt walked in under his own steam. They were bursting with questions, but no one dared ask anything. It remained for Holt to say the first word.

He said, "McDermott's a sick, crazy old man. His family is dead or gone. He's a pathetic and disgusting sight. I don't want to talk about the visit."

Sweeping past them, Holt ascended the shaft to the command room. He peered out, over the snowy field. There was a double track in the snow, leading to and from McDermott Keep, and the sunlight blazed in the track.

The building shuddered suddenly. Holt heard a hiss and a whine. He flipped on his communicator and a robot voice said, “McDermott Keep is attacking, your lordship. We’ve deflected a high-energy bombardment.”

“Did the screens have any trouble with it?”

“No, your lordship. Not at all. Shall I prepare for a counterattack?”

Holt smiled. “No,” he said. “Take defensive measures only. Extend the screens right to the border and keep them there. Don’t let McDermott do any harm. He’s only trying to provoke me. But he won’t succeed.”

The tall, gaunt man walked to the control panel. His gnarled hands rested lovingly on the equipment. So they had come to warfare at last, he thought. The cannon of McDermott Keep were doing their puny worst. Flickering needles told the story: whatever McDermott was throwing was being absorbed easily. He didn’t have the firepower to do any real harm.

Holt’s hands tightened on the controls. Now, he thought, he could blast McDermott Keep to ash. But he would not do it, any more than he would have thrown the switch that would have ended Andrew McDermott’s life.

McDermott did not understand. Not cruelty, but simple selfishness, had kept him from killing the enemy lord. Just as, all these years, Holt had refrained from launching an attack he was certain to win. He felt remotely sorry for the paralyzed man locked in the life-capsule. But it was inconceivable that Holt would kill him.

Once you are gone, Andrew, who will I have to hate?

That was why he had not killed. For no other reason.

Michael Holt peered through the foot-thick safety glass of his command room window. He saw the zone of brown earth, the snowfield with its fresh track, and the coppery ugliness of McDermott Keep. His intestines writhed at the hideousness of that baroque tower against the horizon. He imagined the skyline as it had looked a hundred years ago, before McDermott had built his foul keep.

He fondled the controls of his artillery bank as though they were a young girl’s breasts. Then he turned, slowly and stiffly, making his way across the command room to his chair, and sat quietly, listening to the sound of Andrew McDermott’s futile bombardment expending itself against the outer defenses of Holt Keep as the winter night fell.

FOUR BRANDS OF IMPOSSIBLE

by Norman Kagan (1931--)
Fantasy & Science Fiction, September

Norman Kagan passed briefly through the science-fiction magazines in the middle 1960s with a cluster of five light-hearted stories ("The Mathenauts," "Laugh Along with Franz," "At the Institute," "The Earth Merchants" and this) most of which were set in a milieu of mathematicians or engineers. He seems not to have continued as a science-fiction writer beyond 1965, although a non-fiction book of his, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick,* appeared in 1972 and in a revised edition in 1989.

"That concludes the Travis-Waldinger Theorem," said Professor Greenfield. "As you can see, it's really quite trivial."

"Then why did it take people to prove it!" piped up one teenage hotshot.

The bell cut off Greenfield's reply, and most of the class bolted. All the mathematics people at my school are bad—Greenfield the geometer was a mild case. His motto was, "If you can visualize it, it isn't geometry!" Which is not so bad compared to my other course, where rule one was: "If it seems to make sense, then it's not mathematical logic!"

Which reminded me I still had to find out about my grade in that subject, along with about aleph-sub-aleph other things—most important of which was securing a nice fat student-trainee job for the summer that was fast approaching. I elbowed my way past a couple of teenage hotshots, and then I was in the open air.

I decided I'd check out my marks later—the IBMed grades would be posted on the "wailing wall" all summer. Right now I'd leg it over to the Multiversity Placement Service. I could study for Greenfield's final this afternoon.

I walked across the campus slowly, checking myself out. "Do not judge according to appearance." Try telling that to some of these megabuck research corporations! I mussed my hair and put three more pencils in my breast pocket, and decided not to wear my glasses at the interview. It's amazing how much easier it is to lie to someone you can't really see.

"Hey, Zirkle—Perry—wait half a mo'!"

Harry Mandel hailed me from the psychology library. I grinned and waited for him to join me.

Harry is a swell guy, and besides he's a psychology major, not a math competitor. He joined me, puffing, a moment later. "Summer job hunting?"

"Yeah. I've got a couple of interviews arranged, Serendipity, Inc., and the Virgin Research Corporation."

"Me, too," said Harry. He gestured at my tousled hair. "Getting ready? Physical appearance is very important, you know." The short, pudgy psychology major pumped his legs to keep up with me.

It was a warm, comfortable day on the Multiversity campus. The long rows of wooden chairs were already set up for graduation, and here and there was a girl in long hair and levis, or a bearded boy with a guitar. Early summer session people. Lazy jerks.

"What's the word on the companies?"

Mandel wrinkled up his forehead. "Personnel men—not technical people. So if you've got the grades, go all out—anything to avoid the paper barrier."

"Any specific suggestions?"

"Mmmm—well, Fester pulled a full-scale epileptic fit—but then he's nearly a five point. If you're just bright, a few eccentricities ought to do it. I'm trying my bug-on-the-walls gambit."

"You mean the one where you pretend there's a bug that crawls all over the walls behind the interviewer, and you follow it with your eyes."

"No—that was last year. In this one I sort of scrunch up in the chair, cowering—give 'em the impression I can't stand confined spaces, need lots of room—like, say, New Mexico or Arizona. I'm sick of this east coast weather, and the Virgin Research Corporation has labs in New Mexico."

"That's for me, too. I'll see what I can think up."

In the 1980's, it's practically impossible to get a summer job in the sciences—not that the big science and engineering corporations don't want you, they do. But to apply, you've got to submit about a ton of paperwork—eight commendations, four transcripts, character references, handwriting samples, personality profiles, certificates and forms and diplomas. Who has the energy?

Science and engineering majors, however, have worked out a swell dodge—we just pretend we're a little bit nuts. The big company personnel departments are endlessly amused by the antics of their nutty research wizards. With the squeeze on for technical people, it's easy to fake looniness well enough for the personnel men to see that cause follows from effect, in that wonderful way of theirs, and conclude we're the brilliant boys they're looking for.

Or maybe they just get a kick out of watching us degrade ourselves in front of them.

I had a couple of swell dodges I'd worked out from one of my professors—through the length of the interview I'd keep pulling a piece of chalk from my pocket, sticking it into my mouth, then spitting it out and muttering; "Simply must give up smoking!" For dubious types, I'd offer my *pièce de rèsistance*; all through the talk I would gesture and wave my arms, seeming to shape the very job concept out of the air. Then, when the interview had reached a critical juncture, I'd pause, drop to the floor, and lie on my back staring at the empty spaces I'd been manipulating. As the interviewer came round the desk, I'd cry out in annoyance, "Simply must look at this from a new point of view!" It worked like a charm.

Except for this time. Not that it didn't; I just never got the chance to use it. On this job, all the craziness came at the end.

The interviewer for the Virgin Research Corporation was a big blond crewcut man with terribly stained teeth and a sadist's smile. He reminded me of one of my philosophy professors. He was talking philo at me too, about half a second after I sat down in the little interview cubicle.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Zirkle—you're a mathematics major, by your application. Is that right?"

I nodded.

"Sit down, sit down," he said, gesturing. "Now, before I begin to ask about you, I'd like to tell you a little about the activities of the Virgin Research Corporation, Mama, as we call her around the shop. Our organization is concerned with the three aspects of pure research, what we like to call 'The three brands of impossible.' "

I nodded at this. Harry Mandel's eyes had been shining when he'd passed me outside the room, but he hadn't time to whisper more than a fiery "Grab it, fellow!" to me before I was ushered in. I hunched forward and began to listen.

"If we ignore subjective problems—what the Kansas farmer said when he saw his first kangaroo—we might analyze the concept of the impossible as follows."

He pulled out a diagram, and his finger danced down it as he continued to speak.

"First, there is the 'technically impossible'—things that are not possible in practice, though there's no real reason why they can't be done. Things like putting the toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube, or sending an astronaut to Saturn—such things aren't practical at the moment, I think!" he said, smiling briefly.

"Then there is the notion of the 'scientifically impossible'—traveling faster than light, or building a perpetual motion machine. These are not possible at all—within the limitations of what we know about the universe. But you'll recall, a heavier-than-air flying machine was a 'scientific impossibility' a century ago.

"These two categories have merged somewhat in the twentieth century, though the distinction is clear enough. In the first case, the 'technically impossible,' theory allows you to do the impossible—you just haven't the techniques. In the second instance, the 'scientifically impossible,' you've got no *theoretical* justification for what you want to do. But in both cases, men have 'done the impossible'—either developed new techniques or found the flaws and limitations in the theories.

"But there is a third category of the impossible, one ignored by even the most farsighted researchers—the 'logically impossible'!" The interviewer's voice rose in triumph, and his other hand, which had remained in his pocket, furiously jangled his change.

I blinked at him. "But the logically impossible is—"

"I know, I know, I've listened to that stuff from our professional consultants," said the big blond man, suddenly impatient. "The logically impossible is part of an arbitrary system which would be destroyed by any attempt to—" he shrugged his shoulders in annoyance.

"Let me tell you," he cried, "that the Virgin Research Corporation has investigated the problem and decided otherwise. Our experts have—and they are some of the best men in the field, much better than any jerky Ivy League Multiversity can afford—our experts are convinced that such notions as the 'round-square' are meaningful, and what's more, are of potentially great military value!"

His eyes were crazed. " 'When the battle's lost and won,' indeed," he murmured in a low, sinister voice. He smiled at me coldly, and the rotten stains on his teeth stood out like the craters of the moon.

"We're using a two-pronged approach—psychology and mathematical logic. We've had no trouble recruiting psychology majors," he continued in a normal tone, "but most of the students in the mathematics department weren't interested—or they've got to spend the summer with their families at home or away."

It was my turn to grin. That's what they got for trying to interest any of the teenage hotshots. But I wasn't afraid to broaden my mental horizons, I was willing to wrestle with the impossible, I was brave enough to face the unknown. My smile widened, and then my face grew serious as I took up the challenge.

"How much?"

"Two fifty a week, recommendations, room and board and a motor scooter, and free transportation in a G.E.M. cruiser to and from the New Mexico labs," said the blond man.

"Well—"

"With your record, you should jump at the chance," he said. "I've seen your transcripts, son." He began jangling his change again.

That "son" decided me. "Hmmmm—"

"All right, all right, we'll talk it over," he said, a little sharply. In science and mathematics, all the old guys are scared of all the young guys. You do your best work when you are young, and everyone's seared of being "burned out at thirty." Just like I'd love to line my teenage competitors up against a wall and plug 'em, I could see he was scared of me.

He pulled out my preliminary transcripts and applications, and began thumbing them. I slipped off my glasses, and licked my lips.

Later I found out I got A-minus on the mathematical logic final. I should've asked for fifty more than the three-twenty-five I got out of that terrified jerk.

The G.E.M. *Ruby* thundered west, the ground effect keeping it a dozen feet above the earth. The machine soared along, impossibly graceful, as night mastered day on the American Great Plains.

I peered out the big picture window, fully relaxed for the first time in many weeks. The orientation and information kit lay ignored across my knees. I'd look at it later. No more lab reports, no more little phrases like, "I'll leave that as an exercise," that meant a dozen hours of skull sweat, no more, "I'm sorry, but some pre-med sliced those pages out of the book you wanted with a razor blade last term." At the moment, I didn't care if the directors of the Virgin Research Corporation had cerebrum, cerebellum and medulla in their brain pans, or scrambled eggs. By Napier's bones, I'd escaped!

Someone was struggling up the aisle against the pressure of the *Ruby's* acceleration (we'd just pulled out of Ann Arbor). With a gasp he collapsed into the acceleration chair beside me. "Greetings!" I murmured. "You one of Mama's boys?" About half the people on the *Ruby* were working for V.R.C. It's only these tremendous mysterious corporations that can afford intercontinental jet flights and G.E.M.s and—and pure mathematicians, thank goodness!

"Hello, yes," said my companion. He was a skinny, baffled-looking fellow about my own age. His very pale face said, "Yourself?"

"Perry Zirkle—I'm in the numbers racket—uh, I'm a pure mathematician."

"Uh, Richard Colby—microminaturization and electronics—I'm a grad student at Michigan Multi. If you can see it, then it's too big. My motto." Colby's face brightened and he grinned. *His* teeth were okay. "Say, I've got those books—you must be on the logical impossibility research the same as I am—Project Round-Square!"

I nodded and smirked at the books. "I suppose so—though from what I've been taught, I doubt if the project will last very long."

Colby settled himself and relaxed. "How so?" he asked. He didn't look like a monomaniacal studier—just an electron pusher in his twenties. He wasn't one of these kid geniuses, either, and I was rested and relaxed. So naturally, my mouth got the better of me.

"Just on the face of it—," I argued calmly. "Paradoxes and self-contradictions are interesting, and they attract attention to ideas, but by their very nature—" I found myself unable to continue.

"Maybe," Colby said. "But maybe you're just looking at the problem the wrong way—the fellow that interviewed me kept talking about 'thinking in other categories.' "

I paused. "Oh, I know what he meant," I said, and laughed. "He was trying to tell you not to argue, not at two-fifty a week."

"Two-twenty-five," he murmured.

The electronics expert hesitated, and then looked at me oddly. "I don't know about you," he muttered, "but I consider it an honor and a pleasure to be able to do some 'pure' research. There's little enough of it in electronics these days—the whole subject has about one real scientist to a hundred engineers." His eyes were hooded. In the dimly lit passenger compartment of the G.E.M., his face was dark and brooding. He licked his lips and went on, talking to himself as much as he was to me.

"It's enough to make you go into industry. Take my own school, the Michigan Multiversity. Did you know we have a top secret Congressional Project to automate the presidency? Fact. The chairman of the Department of Cybernetics told me the system philosophy behind it: "Roosevelt showed that someone could be president as long as he liked. Truman proved that anyone could be president. Eisenhower demonstrated that you don't really need a president. And Kennedy was further proof that it's dangerous to *be* a human president. So we're working out a way to automate the office." He grinned, and I laughed in response.

I reached down into my fagbag and pulled out a bottle. His eyes went wide for a moment, but I passed it to him. He took a slug, and the evening was on its way.

Colby turned out to be all right. I told him Smith's remark about how engineers are sloppy when they call "characteristic values", "eigenvalues," because "eigenvalue" isn't good English. He came back with the one about the sequence that you had to prove converged, but that all the students demonstrated diverged. The Professor's masterful reply was, "It converges *slowly.*"

The ground effect machine rushed on through the midwestern night, a foot or two above the earth, supported by a flaring cushion of air. Presently its path curved south. The pilot-driver was steering by radar beacon and navigation satellite, towns and buildings signifying no more than treacherous shoals and reefs to a sailor. The craft was flying over ground that had never, and might now be never, touched by wheels or feet. Over these wastes we plunged southwest.

Dick Colby couldn't hold it very well, or maybe he was tired. In any event the fellow was soon sleeping peacefully beside me. I let him be and stared at the scenery.

These fellows that believe the "pures vs. applieds" battle really amuse me. Actually, science and scientists are just like anything else in this rotten world, just as corrupt. I've heard stories of research men during the great "Space Flight Bubble" that would trade jobs a dozen times in a year, doubling their salary each time. And these stories about advertising men that run off with the best accounts and start their own agencies? Nothing to the technical men that impress the Pentagon and get the generals to finance them in their own electronics company. Though I don't feel much sympathy for the big firms. Anyone that builds H-bombs and missiles and lets someone else decide what to do with them—people like that deserve everything they get!

What was wrong with me lately? I still loved to work and study, to cram till one, then feel the high tension as the papers were handed out the next day. The gong that announced the start of the test always reminded me of the one on the old TV show, "Beat the Clock." And there was nothing like the feeling in front of the posted grades, when I saw the shocked faces of the youngsters I'd beaten out. Tough luck, kid! Better switch to art history!

I lit a cigarette and leaned back. Well, right or wrong, this stuff would be fun. Science always is. I love to be totally absorbed in something new and strange. It's so much better than just sitting around doing nothing, or dull routine stuff. Frankly, I don't see how the hundred million unemployed can take it. My mood when I'm idle is usually a murderous rage at the kids who're going to parties and dances and junk like that. Not that that stuff is really *interesting,* like a problem in Greenfield space. But at least it's something, compared to sitting all alone with nothing to think about but myself. Frankly, I love really tough problems, the kind you have to think about *all the time.*

Dawn was peeping up over the horizon. I settled myself in my own acceleration chair, and tried to snatch a little sleep. My own watch said that in a few hours we'd arrive at the immense desert reservation which held the Virgin Research Corporation, summer student trainees for the enigmatic Project Round-Square.

"These are your quarters, Mr. Colby and Mr. Zirkle," said the blond girl. She was worth a second glance, being the possessor of a fine body, though a little bow-legged ("Pleasure bent," Colby murmured). Still, a very nice body.

Colby dumped his junk on the bed, and began opening drawers in the dresser and putting it away. I stood still and read the information sheet we'd been given on arrival. It said I had to report at the Computer Center as soon as convenient. I put my own bags in the closet and went.

Outside, the desert sunlight was quite bearable, since it was only a few hours after sunup. I walked across the compound, guided by a map on the fact sheet.

The living quarters were good: simple ranch-style stuff with desks and bookshelves duplicated in each room. This was no resort, but the place was clean and kept up, without the bleakness of a straight government installation. The labs and auxiliary buildings were spread out over the desert, the whole business enclosed by a security frontier. This made internal security checks unnecessary, and there were none.

People dressed informally: chinos, dungarees, western boots and flannel shirts. A pleasant change after school, where most everyone was formal most of the time—except for the technical students.

Of course they made us pay for it. All the co-eds are hot for someone they can discuss the Great Books with, not some barbarian science or engineering major with a sliderule swinging from his belt. I've seen these Zenish girls, with their long hair and thongs and SANE buttons, wild for motor cyclers and African exchange students. Rotten snobs! Though I've got to admit that some of my friends in the engineering school depend more on force than persuasion for their pleasure. Ha-ha!

The Computer Center was mostly underground, to make temperature regulation easier. These big machines really heat up. I know that back at the Arthur Regleihofp Computing Center, at my own multiversity, they have an enormous air conditioning plant through all the machine rooms, with dozens of recording thermometers. If the temperature in the labs goes above a certain point, the electrical power to the computers is shut off. Otherwise you have something called a computer explosion, which no one at the labs wants to talk about. All I know is that during the summer, the machine rooms are the best place to relax, because they're so cool. And I can always scare the teenage-geniuses who run them into letting me rubberneck.

So I reported to the Computer Center, and found my wonderful creative position from which I could challenge the unknown—the programming saddle of an obsolete I.B.M. aleph-sub-zero—a jazzed-up Turing Engine. The same noble trade I'd learned six years before, as a youngster in the Science Honors Program at the multiversity.

An International Business Machines aleph-sub-zero tests a mathematical model against reality. The device begins grinding out deductions from the model, and checking them about facts about the phenomenon. If they check out, fine. If not, it begins to blink and tremble in agitation.

This one had a few peculiarities. The "mode" was about ten times as complex as normal, there were fifty more storage units—and the runs averaged less than ten seconds.

By the end of the day, I was bored, frustrated, and very disgusted. I could barely keep from grabbing my teenage assistant by his ankles, swinging him around in a heavy arc, and smashing out his smiling freckled face against the machine's one-to-ones. Rotten teenage competitor! Fortunately I ran into Harry Mandel directly afterwards, without having to look him up. At least that was something. One thing led to another, and two hours later, together with Richard Colby, the three of us were exchanging impressions.

"Oh, I suppose it's all I could expect," I told them disgustedly. "They're setting up odd sorts of logical-mathematical models—ones without the law of self-contradiction, either A or not-A. Things like that. Then they run them through the aleph-sub-zero as a check. Only—" and I took a deep slug from my glass, "—none of them work."

Harry Mandel bobbled his head up and down enthusiastically, so that it seemed to flicker in the cool dim corner of the White Sands Bar. Harry has this habit of shaking his head in violent agreement, while his eyes grow larger and larger with each sentence you speak. It gives you the funny feeling that every word you say is confirming some incredible theory of his: that you're a Chinese Communist, or a paranoid schizophrenic, or an Arcturian spy. It's really quite frightening until you get used to it.

Also, his lips were trembling and his hands quivering. I knew the signs. Once he started talking, he'd never stop. So I gave the nod to Richie Colby instead.

The electronics expert looked up from his drink. "I don't know," he muttered. "I'm on the psychological-biological end, and so far I can't understand what's going on. They've got me working on topological neuronic maps—mapping the circuits of the brain. But for what, I don't know." He went back to the drink he was nursing.

I took a sip from my Coke. I don't drink more than I have to, and neither do most of my friends. In spite of all this talk about college students boozing it up, I'll be damned if I'll rot my brains, the brains that have to beat out all those teenage hotshots!

The White Sands Bar was a pretty good one, quiet with a kitchen. A while before we'd had a pizza, heavy with cheese and olive oil. It's funny how much time I spend in bars. Our civilization has wonderful extensive facilities for some things, fragmentary ones or none at all for others. It's perfectly clear how to fill out the forms and go to class and take exams and apply and student all the way to a Ph.D.—but how the hell do you have a good time? I heard they had to double the psychiatric service up at M.I.T. Sometimes I have crazy insane dreams of getting out of this whole mess, quitting. But where could I go, what would I do, who would be my friends? *Who would be my friends?* Anyway, bars are all right, and this bar, the White Sands Bar, was a pretty good one.

I took up another drink. Richard Colby was staring dumbly into his. "Okay, Harry," I said.

"To understand my end, you'll need to know what the universe is," said Mandel quickly and incoherently. "People ask, 'Why is the universe the way it is?' And Kant answered them back: 'Because the universe is a tango!' "

"Huh?"

"Don't you know what a tango is?" said Harry quizzically. "Why, even all my buddy-buddy psychology major friends know *that*. You know—like this—" and he moved his hips suggestively. He grabbed up his Sloe Gin and Coke, and finished it off in a single gulp. "Daiquiri!" he cried to the waitress. "Like this, boys," he moaned, beginning to sway again.

It took a little while to make our questions clear, but presently Harry was sketching on a napkin with his Mr. Peanut pen.

"Remember that proof in high school geometry—Tenth Year Mathematics to you, Perry—where you show that a line segment has only one perpendicular bisector. You strike arcs from the endpoints, and draw the line from one intersection to the other. But why should the arcs have any intersection? And why couldn't there be *two* lines that were straight and went through both intersection points? I bet you never thought of that!"

He looked up from his diagram defiantly.

Dick Colby blinked at him, his long face weary.

"I'll *tell* you why!" cried Harry Mandel, downing half his Daiquiri. He put the glass down and spoke decisively. "Because the universe is a tango—we see it this way because *we have to*—we're built this way. Anything else would be a logical impossibility—a contradiction. We can't experience the world any other way. We see it this way because we're built a certain way, and the universe is built a certain way. Reality is the interaction of the two parts—and the universe is a tango!"

He tossed down the rest of the woman's drink and nodded powerfully. "Any one of my buddy-buddy psychology major friends will tell you that!"

Colby and I nodded agreement. Mandel always was something of a nut. I never trust short guys—their mothers always tell them about Napoleon when they're little, and they always take it the wrong way.

Mandel was still gabbling. "But this doesn't mean we'll always have to look at things this way. We won't have to always think of a round-square as impossible. That's what my part of Project Round-Square is all about, the part with my buddy-buddy psychology major friends. We're going to change the music. We're going to give one partner dancing lessons!"

It was five weeks more before I learned that Mandel had in fact not been kidding around, nor really drunk at all. That was the essence of the psychology half of Project Round-Square. But a lot happened between that first night at the White Sands Bar and then.

For one thing, they closed down the mathematics-logic side of the installation. I had about a week more of that "Start Program!" "Zip-pip-pip-pip-pip!" "Clang! Clang! Clang! Discrepancy! Discrepancy!" nonsense, then two days of absolutely flawless correlations—as good as any of the test runs between economics and high school math, or advanced calculus and statics and dynamics. Whatever was being sent into the aleph-sub-zero, it was a perfect fit with the real world. The first day I was wildly enthusiastic, the second I was bewildered—maybe they were checking themselves? And the third day, I wasn't given any programs. The head of my section, a young man named Besser, showed up about an hour later and told me we were shutting down. I was to be reassigned.

"But why? The last two runs were perfect!"

"The last runs—" he began, then sighed. He looked more like a truck driver than a worker with the subtle squiggles of mathematical logic. "The last two runs were exercises in futility. You've had some undergraduate symbolic logic—you must have some idea of what we're trying to do."

I nodded.

"Well, rigorously speaking, the way to eliminate the notion of 'impossible' is to get rid of contradiction—get a sort of logic where you can have a 'round-square,' as a legitimate notion. Then you build a language with that logic. Understand me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Now, this seems—ahem, unlikely. If you've ever taken an introductory course in philosophy, there's always a kid who talks about there being 'some crazy kind of logic' where things could be red *and* blue, round *and* square." He shrugged in annoyance. "The professor can usually shut him up, and if he's persistent, embarrass him to death. Those kids are the sort that embarrass pretty easily."

I nodded. This guy knew something of college life.

"So that's what the meta-mathematicians and symbolic logicians upstairs have been working on. You see, while such things are silly to talk about here in the real world, you *can* have a logic without the 'not' operator. Such logics have been set up in the past—but they weren't very interesting, they weren't *rich,* fruitful in new ideas. But anyway, you can make such a thing, you can even build up to a mathematics from it, the way Russell and Whitehead built up numbers from logic in *Principia.* And you use your math to build a logic and a language—to describe the world. No 'not' means no opposites—which seems to mean no contradictions." He wiped his face and tried to look annoyed, but it was difficult. Good old air conditioning.

"Do you see?"

"I think so. Real world again—didn't match up."

"Kee-rect. Your math is no good for the real world. It's just wrong—like trying to navigate an ocean liner with plane geometry. Since the earth is round, it doesn't work out."

I nodded.

"I mean, it's *right*—it's *valid*—it just doesn't describe anything real," he corrected hastily. "Seems as if you *must* have contradiction."

"That's why the runs on the aleph-sub-zero were so short? The computer would spot a contradiction, and start yapping. But how about the last two runs—perfect straight out. What was the matter with them?"

"Oh, those," he groaned. "Those were that jerk Kadison's idea. The exclusion approach."

"Go on."

"Well, you know there's another way to eliminate the notion of a contradiction. By exclusion."

"Elucidate."

"Think of it this way," said Besser. "You understand the notions of tall and short, and you know such things are relative. But if you decide that everyone under twenty feet tall was short—then you couldn't have a contradiction, a notion of 'short-tall.' Everyone would be short, and you'd eliminate one sort of contradiction. 'Tall-short' would mean the same as 'mimsey-short'—'nonsense word-short,' or just 'short.' And you keep on going that way. This was Kadison's idea."

"It worked perfectly in the machine."

"Sure it did. And it's also perfectly useless. *All* gradations and comparisons drop out—and brother, you don't know how many there are. You know, most every quality has its opposite in *something* else. Even the notions of matter and empty space. You get nothing left—I mean *nothing*—the problem becomes trivial."

"The universe is an uncle," I said.

"Yeah, except for uncle say any other word. The universe becomes one solid, undescribable lump, with no qualities at all."

Also, Harry Mandel began to crack up. I didn't notice it while I was working—that aleph-sub-zero had some good problems—but when I was unassigned, the only real activity I had was going to the White Sands Bar. It was during the drinking sessions that his madness began to blossom.

Now of course I know all about the science of modern psychology—it's one reason I've remained so balanced and stable. Myself, I'm what is known as a shame personality. It's a matter of personal honor with me that I fight to the limit for the highest grades and the most scholarship. I'll beat 'em all out. That's me.

Dick Colby was clearly a guilt personality. He really believed all that guff about the scientist's worldview, about the search for truth, about following an abstract pattern of behavior. Poor old Dick, he had an abstract moral code too, as I might have expected. Well, he had to follow the rules, and he might get kicked in the belly, but at least he was stable in his sad, picky way.

Now Harry Mandel was a fear personality. He tried to belong to some sort of whole, to link its destiny with his own. A gestalt. You find a lot like that: fraternity boys, soldiers, club members, athletes on a team. And of course the intellectuals—the literary group and Zenish girls and the interdependent independents.

Ain't social psychology great!

Anyway, Mandel's kind of twitch, the fear personality, is okay as long as he really has his buddies and believes it. If he doesn't have them, he wanders around until he can link up with a new bunch. If he doesn't *believe* he has them—look out! A fear personality with doubts about its gestalts can slide right over into paranoid schizophrenia.

It came out in funny ways, distorted, because Mandel was very intelligent, and the more intelligent, the more little links can begin to snap and break. One night in late August he came up with this:

"I mean, I have nothing against that particular minority group," he said loudly. "It's just that—well, look at it this way. The original members were selected on the basis of crude physical strength—the smart clever ones escaped the slavers. Then they were brought over here, and were slaves for several hundred years. Now it seems to me that if you have slaves, you're going to encourage breeding among the stupid and the strong. You don't want smart quick ones. As a matter of fact, the smart quick ones would try to escape, and would be shot. Or else, if they're clever, slip over the color line and intermarry.

"So you see, you've had forces at work for three hundred years that bred—I mean in terms of human genetics—for less intelligence. You do that for three centuries and it shows—as a matter of fact, it *does* show. In terms of modern science, they might even *be* inferior."

He was crazy, insane. For one thing, three hundred years isn't long enough to matter genetically for humans. For another, "the smart clever ones" *didn't* escape the slavers' round-ups any more than the others did. Maybe if Mandel had been a slave owner he'd have tried to encourage only the stupid to breed, but such eugenically-oriented thinking didn't exist in times past. As for shooting would-be escapees, you don't destroy valuable merchandise like that, you bring it back alive. [Anyway, you don't talk about races, you talk about human beings.] Mandel was rationalizing, justifying immoral attitudes on the basis of a "science" which really doesn't exist. As for "scientific morality," hell, science and morality are different, and by trying to base one on the other you are setting up for something like Hitler's "final solution."

Yet poor disturbed Mandel had *thought the theory up*. And for an instant, thinking of the exchange students and the Zenish girls back at the multiversity, my own brain had become inflamed. Science, reason, intellect—there are some things you mustn't think about. God help me.

A flash of disgust went through me. I never wanted to do any more calculations. I wanted to lie down with some pretty girl and make love to her and have her soothe me. I was too long alone. Help me! Then I squeezed those thoughts away.

I pushed away the thick silvery tin with the remains of the pizza. Delicious, too. Their cook was improving. Or maybe he could get real Mexican spices, not the stuff I used to settle for in Woolworth's.

I looked at Mandel across the table. His face was beginning to cave in a little, and his eyes looked tired. Anyway, we had to talk about something else. I decided to find out some things about my new assignment. And that was thing number three. That afternoon I'd be transferred to the psychology attack team-programming again, the Urbont matrices of neurological maps.

"How's the job, Harry?" I asked him. "How's the dancing lessons coming?"

Mandel looked up. He hadn't mentioned his work in a couple of weeks, not since we'd taken his little lecture on Kant and the tango as a rib.

"What about it?" he asked crisply. "I don't know very much, I just do whatever they tell me."

They—his buddy-buddy psychologist buddies? Mmmmm.

"Well, whatever they've been telling you, they'll soon be telling me," I said, nudging him in the shoulder. "I'll be figuring out your brain maps for you."

"Oh, yeah. They ought to start programming in two weeks, and then installation—"

"Hey, installation? Whooa? What are you talking about?"

Mandel's slumped body seemed to collapse some more. He was so far forward I could hardly see his face. Just a dark form against the well lit rest of the bar. Cigarette smoke hung in the air, and a dozen technicians were seated on the high stools. Over in another corner, two disgruntled physicians were playing NIM. A couple of the girls from the clerical pool were having heroes and Cokes at another table, blond and brownette in brief desert costumes.

"Sensory enervation," said Mandel in a dead voice. "What else did you think?"

He blinked mildly and slugged down the rest of his Horse's Neck. "Rum and Coke!" he shouted to the barman. "I really hate to drink," he confided sullenly. "But at least I can do it alone, without my psychology major buddy-buddies." Richard Colby gave me a funny look and we both leaned forward and really began to listen.

In the 1950s, the psychologists of McGill University had commenced an interesting sequence of experiments in connection with the U.S. manned space flight program—an early phase of the "Space Flight Bubble." A space traveler confined to his space capsule would be in a state of extreme "sensory deprivation"—with so little to see, hear and feel, the psychologists theorized, the astronaut might go insane. The McGill University experiments were designed to investigate this thesis, and even more extreme cases of sensory deprivation.

The perfection of brain circuit mapping had suggested the obverse experiment to the scientists of Project Round-Square. If sensory deprivation could debase a man, weaken him and drive him out of his mind—why not attempt "sensory enhancement." Enriching a man's senses by requiring his recticular formations to accept data detected by machines—the total memory storage of a computer, the complete electromagnetic spectrum, the sorting out of patterns and wave forms which was possible to oscilloscopes.

Volunteers weren't too hard to find—the McGill men had found volunteers, promising not much more than money and a chance at madness.

A man's concepts of the world vary according to the data he receives. For thousands of years, men had been building up systems and structures of describing the universe, without trying to improve the methods used to accept the data. Scientific instruments were not enough—could light and color have meaning, be *real,* to a blind man? The scientists of Project Round-Square hoped that the contradictions and impossibilities of Reality might disappear for a man with enhanced senses. The system philosophy was illustrated in the poem "The Blind Man and the Elephant."

"Could a dolphin discover Relativity?" said Mandel, almost angrily. "Of course not—plenty of brains, just never was even able to sense much beyond the other dolphins. Likewise, there may be enormous fields of knowledge we've never noticed, because of our sensory lacks.

"More than that, it's a *positive* approach!" cried Mandel, "The first in seventy years. Before this, all of psychology was concerned with debasing man, turning him into a super rat, a little black box which was fed a stimulus and kicked back a response. Automatons!"

"What about psychoanalysis and the Freudians?"

"Bleugh!" cried Mandel, enervated himself for once. "They're the worst of all. The Id, Ego, and Super-Ego are just mental mechanisms, things beyond our control, which interact to produce behavior."

It was nice to see Mandel cheerful. There's nothing better for these neurotic types than to let them talk and talk and talk, it helps reassure them. Maybe they think no one will threaten them or kick them in the belly as long as they are blabbing. A false notion produced by too much well-written t.v. drama.

"But still," I said slowly, waggling a finger at him. (Or was I waggling and the finger standing still. I must drink less).

"But, Harry," I continued. "All the colors of the rainbow won't alter this picture," and I flipped one of the White Sands Bar's napkins at him. It has a nice colored picture of a Valkyrie missile on it, from the days when White Sands was a proving grounds, before the "Space Flight Bubble" burst.

"Maybe not," he mumbled. "But that's only the neurological part of the idea. We're building compulsions to succeed into it, too. The kids will *have* to work out a world without impossibilities."

"Kids?" asked Colby dimly. "Keep talking, Harry."

Mandel blinked and then continued. A lot of the rest was whined and mumbled, but I thought I got most of it.

The subjects of the brain wiring were youngsters between twelve and sixteen. The psychologists had settled on those as the optimum age limits: young enough to be typified by directness, immediacy, wholeness, spontaneity and integral fantasy. Teenage hotshots, in other words. Old enough to want to make sense of all the data, and young enough so their world view wasn't rigid.

You can look up all the psychology words except the last. "Integral fantasy" was the most important. Studies had shown this quality is most typical of real genius, and the kids had been specially selected for it. What it means is this. Most people have fantasies, but the fantasy is "disassociated"—it is unreal to them, like sex magazines and comic books. Children, especially geniuses, have "integral fantasies"—they get wild complex ideas about the real world. Ordinary people call these "strokes of genius," if they happen to work.

"And what's more," muttered Mandel, head down on the table, "they'll have to make *sense* out of it. They've had hypnosis and drug compulsions to succeed, so their new sensory picture will have to be free of logical contradictions. It'll have to be!"

I was about to ask him how they'd be able to communicate with them after the kids had "made contact"—but before I could, Harry dropped out of the game. He lay unconscious across the table. "Kids!" he murmured, hatefully.

So I was doing mathematics again, setting up Urbont matrices, the curious descendants of time-variable, multi-port switching and communications math. Far more subtle than any of these, however—the Urbont equations didn't analyze radars or satellite radio links, they symbolized the neuron patterns of the human brain.

It was tedious, subtle, absolutely-right-the-first-time work. The basic units are discrete—on-off switching conditions apply, rather than continuity. In other words, there was no margin for error.

I was getting more of those flashings of hatred and self-hatred. In my little air-conditioned cubicle in the Computer Center, I would get day mares where I would be a bug in a compartment of an ice cube tray—so cool and comfortable and...dead. Every so often my friends would stop by—Dick Colby, bemused and apologetic; Harry Mandel, confused and sullen.

More than once, I thought of informing the medical staff of Mandel's problems but I was afraid to. In the world of science, each man has a "paper shadow" that follows him around—dossiers, transcripts, evaluations by supervisors. Get something bad in among those papers—instability, erratic work habits, even extravagant praise, and you're in trouble. The big corporations like their scientists *a little* peculiar—just for identification.

Anything serious can really ruin a man's career. I thought it might be best for Harry to take his chances—when I thought about him at all. I tried to stay away from emotional subjects.

Fortunately, about this time, the Virgin Research Corporation brought in some new entertainment, so I could relax without raising the alcohol content of my blood.

These were the moebius movies, the new cyclic films. I'd seen the first one, *The Endless War,* previewed in New York City, a few years before. Since then, their sophistication had increased many-fold.

The basic notion was simple. The films were written in such a way that there was no beginning and no end. But this was more than a simple splicing of the two ends. Literally, it was nearly impossible to know where the story commenced. In *The Endless War,* there were at least a dozen places where you could enter, stay the two hours, and leave, coming away with the impression of a complete drama. In fact, depending on where you came in, the film might have been a comedy, a tragedy, a documentary or most anything else.

To the Nth Generation (or *Incest on It!*) was a typical improvement. It dealt with the romantic affairs of several families over (I think) three generations. After forty years, with the amatory relations of the members incredibly tangled, the snarl was twisted back on itself as the original characters were brought forth in and out of wedlock. It was pretty ghastly in a way, but also quite amusing. I hear the French are preparing a film which will do the same thing in two generations, and there's going to be a science fiction picture that does it in one.

I had also heard rumors of the most recent development. Cyclic films had closed the old notion of time, the first "true" moebius would eliminate time as an orienter. With pure dissonant sound, with only the most limited and ingenious movements, a complete showing would have the film run both backward and forward, left-to-right and right-to-left. Enthusiasts predicted it would make *Last Year at Marienbad* look like *Looneytunes.*

I got precious little pleasure out of *To the Nth Generation,* however. Mandel was moaning and groaning about his buddy-buddies and how much he hated kids through the whole thing. I didn't stay past the second time around—and these things are cumulative—ten revolutions of *The Endless War* had made me practically a pacifist.

The trouble was that half an hour into *Incest on It!* I fell off the edge of a cliff. On the screen the Most Beautiful Girl at Queens College was giving birth on the steps of the New York Public Library to the Nobel physicist who would father the owner of the biggest brothel in the Bronx, who in turn might (there were subtle hints) be the parent of the beautiful blond in labor on the dirty white steps.

I would always have teenage competitors! I would get older, and older, and older ("Never produced anything after twenty-seven!" "Burned out at twenty-five, I'd say!" "We keep him around for laughs, and to teach the remedial courses. Never did anything worthwhile after his thesis!") but they would always be coming: young, bright, arrogant, brilliant. I could barely keep from screaming and screaming and screaming. Instead, I made as tight a fist as I could, squeezing, the way I would press the foot rest in the dentist's chair, because it hurts and hurts, and you've got to do *something* when it hurts so much.

I had been wrong about Mandel, or partly. He, like I, would not be shamed. And he saw Project Round-Square as a betrayal by his friends, of the creation by his "buddy-buddies" of new competitors to torment him. I could understand this, though his woe was not mine. His complaints had stimulated me to see my own doom in the endless procreation of the film.

And now I recalled the "Kubie Report" in the *American Scientist:* "Some Unsolved Problems of the Scientific Career." The high incidence of nervous breakdown in the middle years, as the creative energy wore thin. Directness, immediacy, diversity, wholeness, spontaneity, integral fantasy! For these I had denied myself everything, sweating out my advanced degrees before age could touch me. And now I was old, I could feel myself rotting as I sat there. I could feel my brains inside my body: ropy, red, pulsing, tinged with age, hot and glowing inside a pile of gray, fatty, fibrous tissue—my unexercised body. Somehow I managed to get up and stumble out of the theater. Behind me, on the screen, someone was talking on his deathbed to his grandchildren and grandparents, who would turn out to be exactly the same people.

Part of the time I worked intensely at my tapes and card-decks, not daring to pause, afraid to close my machine-language manuals. Other days, sometimes for hours, I could not work closely. I cut free of the job, drifted beyond the "grid" of the scientific attitude. What difference did it make, my mind gibed, if men landed on Mars, or discovered element 1304? Particle, wave, wavicle, round-square—who cares? Science was just another "institution," like anything else. Would a man a thousand years from now laugh at me, the way my seminal engineer friends would chuckle at a scribe in 1000 A.D., who spent his little life endlessly recopying scrolls in a monastery?

It took all my tricks to get through the final weeks. The best was French sleep therapy, which I once read about in a book called *Force Yourself to Relax!* If your troubles are unbearable, knock yourself out until your subconscious has time to patch you up. I tried reading for a while, but I couldn't seem to understand C. P. Snow's two cultures. All I could recall was a passage about someone dying. Snow said that on the point of death, most people care not a whit about their intellectual failures or social lacks. But they cry out endlessly about their missed sensual interludes.

Richard Colby still visited me, but Mandel had stopped coming. In a moment of weakness I'd told him about his "paper shadow." He'd slammed out in a huff. The next day he came back, calm and chipper.

"You look better than I do."

"Of course. All my problems are solved."

"What about your psychology buddies?"

"Oh, I knew none of them were *really* my friends. But I'm set to take care of them, all right, all right."

"Yeah? How?"

"Well, you remember what you told me about my personal file. About how if they decide I'm unstable and borderline, it'll be very hard for me to get any sort of job, and I couldn't be a psychologist any more."

"The situation is something like that, at least with any large organization."

"But as long as I seem all right, all those rats will leave me alone, and even seem to be friendly."

"Well, you don't put it very well—"

"So it's all very simple. I've fixed them all right all right. I went over to chemical stores and got the components for a large bomb. Then I assembled it in the bottom drawer of my desk, in the middle of the Psychology Section of the project. And rigged it with a button detonator."

"Go on, go on!"

"Well, don't you see?"

"No! Go on!"

"It's perfectly plain what I—"

"Mandel, explain!"

"Well, as long as I'm feeling all right, I go on in a perfectly normal way. When I feel a little sick, I go into my office. But if, some day, I think I'm going really nuts, I think I'm really going to go crazy so it all will go down on my personal file and ruin me with the big organization—"

"Yes?"

"Why, then it's as if all my friends are suddenly about to become my enemies, to turn on me, to think I'm crazy and fire me and laugh at me and pity me behind my back." His eyes were mad, though his voice was perfectly level. "They won't be able to do that to Harry Mandel. They won't do it. I'll blow them all to bits first!"

It was enough for me, friend or no. I got word to Personnel, anonymously, and that night they called for Mandel. The poor guy hadn't thought to install one of his "White Collar Kamikazes" in his quarters, so they took him out on the G.E.M. *Topaz* that very night, under heavy sedation.

Was I in much better shape than Harry Mandel had been? A cheerful, hopelessly-neurotic robot. I had come up through the sequence without much real thought about stuff like that. It was enough to do my work. Once, when I was drunk, I had the idea that if you had a perfect baby, you could set up the perfect program for his life, sports and studies and sex and social life, split-second timed, an ideal existence. But it was already twenty years too late for that for me.

Or was that the easy way out, to flunk yourself and roll with the tide? Was I simply "hiding out" in science because it was socially sanctioned and I had a talent for Math?

But on the other side it gave me a pattern for my days, the stability I needed and craved. For this I might do work that I even despised. There must be some way to decide, to choose the optimum path, the really best way, before all your time's run through?

But how do you do it, how could I, of all people, do it?

It was my own brand of impossible.

Project Round-Square finished out fast.

Dick Colby and I sat in one of the electronics labs and watched as the countdown dropped to zero. Closed circuit television brought us a view of the MT-Section, a big room holding more than a dozen aleph-sub-sixes. Dr. Wilbur, the head of the machine translation group, sat at the console of an aleph-sub-nine, the most advanced computer International Business Machines has ever turned out. (*Nobody* really understands it. It was designed by an aleph-sub-eight and the main purpose of the sixes was that collectively they kept the sub-nine from going crazy.)

Mathematical linguistics is the new "in" branch of math, like differential topology used to be, and category theory after that. Wilbur was playing it to the hilt, with ski boots, no tie, and a crappy old sports jacket. But he had a feel for the communications process that amounted to empathy. It was this rare talent that was needed, to help the nine through the clutches.

Above him on the lintel of the machine was the proud motto of the National Programmer's Union, originally a remark by Queen Juliana of the Netherlands:

> "I can't understand it. I can't even understand the
> people who can understand it."

" Project Round-Square," said a disgusted technician. "Still seems crazy to me."

"Perhaps it was a bad choice of name," said Colby next to me. The Michigan electronics expert was tanned and calm, and cheerful as ever. "Did you ever read that poem 'The Blind Men and the Elephant'? It's the same principle. With new senses or a new orientation, apparent contradictions in reality might disappear. It's what some people call 'thinking in other categories.' "

"Like the wavicle," said someone else.

"Yes," said Richard Colby, his face taunting as he smiled. "When physicists were studying certain particles, they found that in some situations they could be thought of as waves, and the equations worked out. In other sorts of reactions, you could think of them as particles, and the numbers and theories checked out under *that* hypothesis. So the physics men just shrugged and called 'em wavicles."

"But what does a wavicle look like—"

"I don't know. Nobody knows—but nobody knows what a round-square looks like either."

The lab grew quiet, as if Colby had said something profound. On the television screen the computers clicked and roared, the tape drives jerking abruptly in their vacuum columns.

"What about military applications—" I croaked at Colby. He seemed to be up to date. I hadn't paid much attention to all the interoffice junk we got on the project—including the *Virgin Tease* newsletter that told the lab assistant in Subsection Nine of Track Four of Approach Nineteen what progress had been made towards the noble goal of Project Sixty-Nine, of which he sometimes recalled he was a member.

"The guy that hired me told me this thing had military applications—I didn't know if he was kidding or I was in a nightmare."

Colby looked at me wide-eyed for a moment. "Well—I don't know. Of course, there doesn't seem to be any *direct* application. But neither did Einstein's equations, or 'game theory' when it was developed. *Any* sort of insight into the world is likely to be militarily useful these days. It doesn't even have to be technical—remember the old German staff armies that were so successful. A simple thing like the chain of command could lick the best general who had to boss his own whole show."

"Just thinking is dangerous these days—often deadly."

"Maybe they ought to classify it," joked Colby.

"But then, I guess it always has been."

On the screen the computers continued to run. Coverage would be confined to the machine-translation lab; the psychologists on the staff had decided to have no reports from the real center of activity.

Outside, in a surface lab, were a dozen adolescents. They had been trained to their peak as scientists, well beyond Ph.D.-level. Now they were being sensitized, exposed to the flood of phenomena that ordinary people never know about, because our wonderful minds are deaf and dumb to nearly everything in the universe. And hidden deep down below their sensitivities, there was a biting, burning, clawing, raving drive to master this new universe they would meet, and to see in it the death of the old human notion of opposites, contradictions, limitations. Nothing, their minds raved as they scanned new skies, nothing must be impossible.

The computers ran for ten hours on the screens, while Wilbur studied and fumed and paced and drank coffee. The subjects would now all have come out of anesthesia, and would now be studying and observing the multitude of apparatus in the lab. Within it, I had been told, there was operating a demonstration of almost every major scientific phenomenon. The sensitized ones had been briefed to the limit, short of data which it was thought might stultify their world view. We could only wait now.

A red light glowed on the aleph-sub-nine, and data began pouring in. Wilbur threw himself into the operator's chair, and began chiding the immense computer, intuitively helping it arrange the data into some sort of language which might mean something to man. His face burned with concentration.

Near the end of the four-hour shift he looked at the machine oddly and tried another system of organization. He looked at it hard again. Then he triggered his secretary. The machine, which had responded to his winking-blinking notes, fed back the information in binary code in his earphones.

He sat back and closed his eyes for a few moments. Then he opened them and took up the microphone. "Communications established. They're intelligible," he said. And then, in a lower voice, "I've seen that structure somewhere before...."

The cheers in the room blotted out anything further. Contact established, and the response was not gibberish! Well, never mind what it meant! We'd get that soon enough.

Premature congratulations? Well, perhaps. Remember the satellite shots, with a rocket roaring up on its own fire, swimming right into the calculated orbit, ejecting its satellite, and the little moon's radios bursting into life. *That* was when everyone cheered! Not six months later, when the miles of telemeter tape had been studied and re-studied and been given meaning by sweat and genius. Nor did most people feel very bad when the scientists figured out that someone had forgotten to pull the safety tabs from the quick-releases, so all the instruments were shielded and their data meaningless....

The actual results of Project Round-Square took eleven months to evaluate and declassify. They came out, nicely distorted, in a copy of the *Virgin Tease* the V.R.C. mailed to me....

Biologically, it was an unqualified success. The sensitized subjects had broken through to a whole new world of feeling. In physical terms, they were quasi-Gods, for they could sense things we would never know. It was more than a widening: new colors and smells. They could sense forces and radiations and bodies all forms of which are ignored by men.

But as to the actual purpose of the project....

The sensitives had been given what seemed to be an insoluble problem—eliminating contradiction in a world that required it in any rational description. The ingenuity of the human mind, the directors of Virgin Research had thought, might solve the problem, where the pure logic of machines had failed.

Well, they had solved it, in a way.

Wilbur had been right. The Hopi Indians, independently, had evolved a crude version of the sensitives' solution. The Hopi language did not allow for the complex tenses of the Indo-European tongues. All time and space to them was a single frozen matrix of events, in which the word "perhaps" had no equivalent, and the notion of "possible" and "impossible" was meaningless.

To ask, in Hopi, if it might rain tomorrow, was as meaningless as to ask if it was possible it had rained yesterday.

To the sensitives, that thing had "roundness" and this one had "squareness." Could there be such a thing as a round-square?

Perhaps, in the forever-fixed future. When it made its appearance, they would tell you. Meanwhile, it's meaningless to think about such things.

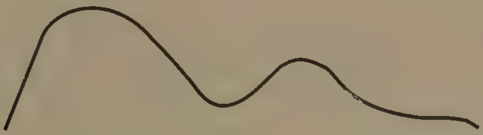
The semanticists were the only satisfied ones.

But this was only announced a year later. Not soon enough to save Harry Mandel, who was relieved of a multi-linear annihilator, fifty yards from the sensitives lab. He'd slugged a guard and escaped from the *Topaz*. I understand he's in a security ward somewhere, still talking about his buddies while they watch him very carefully.

Dick Colby shrugged and grinned and had a drink or four with me at the celebration, then caught the evening ramjet back to Michigan Multi.

I collected my pay, scooter, and recommendations. Then, on the evening of the last day, I took a long look out across the desert. The sun was smoldering down into a pile of rust, the earth a great flat plum. By coincidence the girl that had assigned us our quarters was out on the desert too, but quite a ways away. I could see she was pregnant, and that was interesting to think about, and so I thought about it. I get a nice feeling when I see a woman with a child, if I have time for it—warmth, continuity for the race, the safe days of my very young childhood, though I can hardly remember any of them. There certainly were enough signs of it; she was well along.

I got a funny cold feeling. It was a tangential association, a silly one: what the boys used to call a "brassiere curve" in the rapids. You know what an ordinary bell curve looks like? Well, a lot of teachers use it for marking—most of the grades falling at C. Well, in the advanced sections some guys said the professors used a modified bell curve for figuring out grades—what they called a "brassiere curve". It looked like this:



—and jammed up inside the little hump, good and tight near the B plus, A minus grades, was the little gang of teenage hotshots—and me.

The cold expanded into my chest, numbing. I could look at the sunset, and the blond and her baby, and the labs and drafting boys and offices and all of it, and not feel anything at all. Everything was impersonal, like a diagram in a text.

An hour later I caught the G.E.M. *Emerald* back to my own multiversity. Classes wouldn't be starting for a while, but I'd figured out from the summer session catalogue that I could fit in a three-week intensive reading course in Chinese in the meantime. Chinese is the new "in" language for Ph.D.s, like the way Russian used to be twenty years ago. It was pretty certain we'd be fighting them soon.

I figured I could fit in at least two "military application" courses into my fall program. Under the Rickover Plan I could get them tuition-exempt. What else could I do? I could use the money to pay for more programming. Computer operators are in short supply, and I would be sure of a fat income. I could be safe, nothing to worry about. Maybe I could get Virgin Research, or even the D.O.D. itself, to pay for more math and science courses. I could plan it all out, interesting problems to work on the rest of my life, and get the government to pay for them. Wouldn't that be clever?

Shut up, shut up, shut up.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any great recipe is only as good as the ingredients it's made of. The people who are the backbone of NESFA Press are fabulous ingredients. Huge thanks go to Press Tsar Tony Lewis for all of his help; to Priscilla Olson for her assistance in putting the book into PageMaker; to Alice Lewis for designing the cover; to Mark Olson for general production aid; and to William Shawcross and Rotten Apple Press for scanning the stories. Thanks also to the intrepid band of proofreaders (without whom we would all be lost): Brad Ackerman, Bonnie Atwood, Ann Broomhead, Elisabeth Carey, Pam Fremon, Rick Katze, Tony Lewis, Priscilla Olson, Sharon Sbarsky, Jeff Schwaber and Tim Szczesuil—and especially Final ProofMaster George Flynn. Thanks also to Joe Ross for graciously allowing us to borrow his Eddie Jones painting to use for our cover.

Special thanks to Robert Silverberg and Martin H. Greenberg for choosing these wonderful stories to continue this classic series.

And thank you to NESFA for the privilege of assembling all these ingredients.

— Gay Ellen Dennett
November, 2001
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